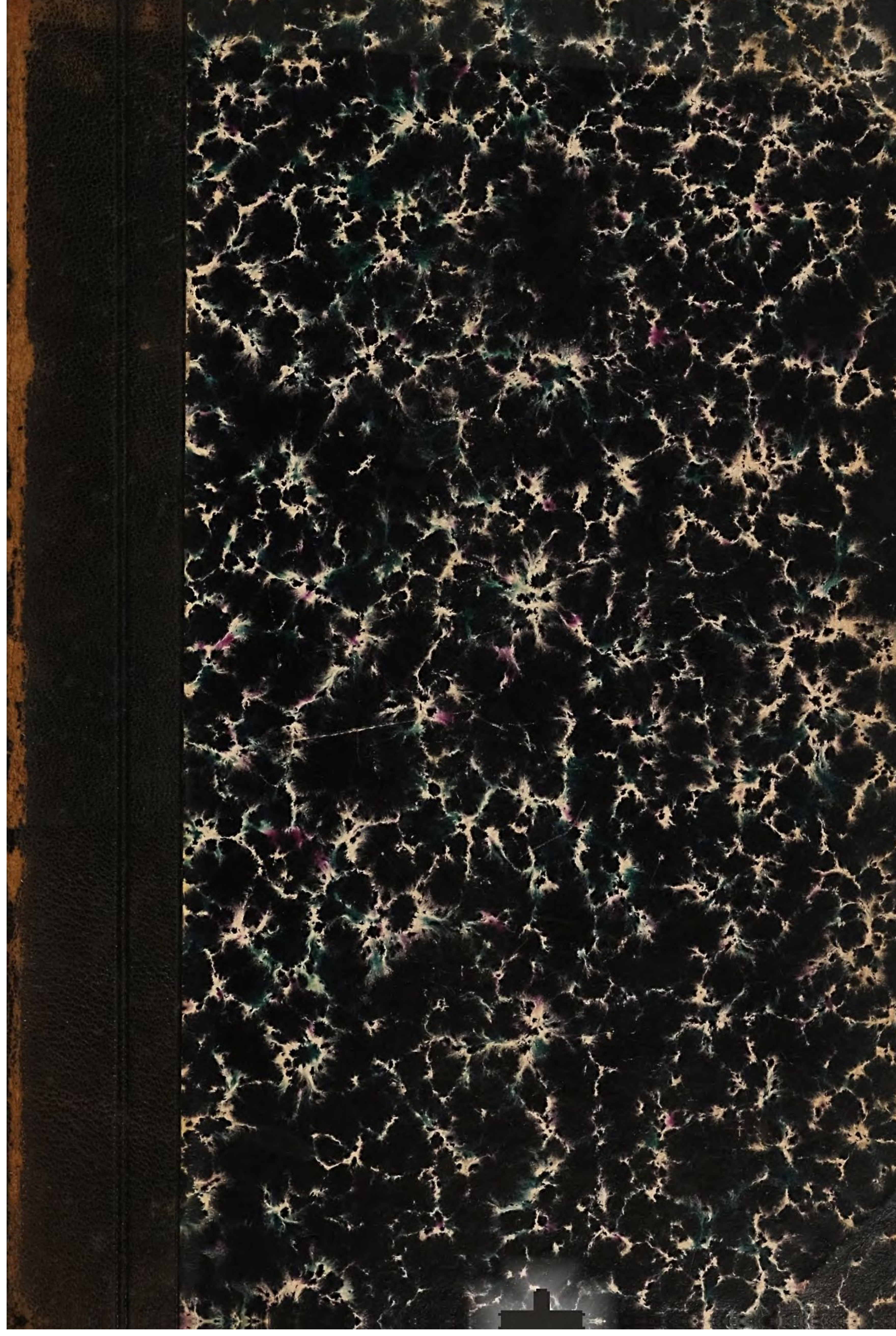




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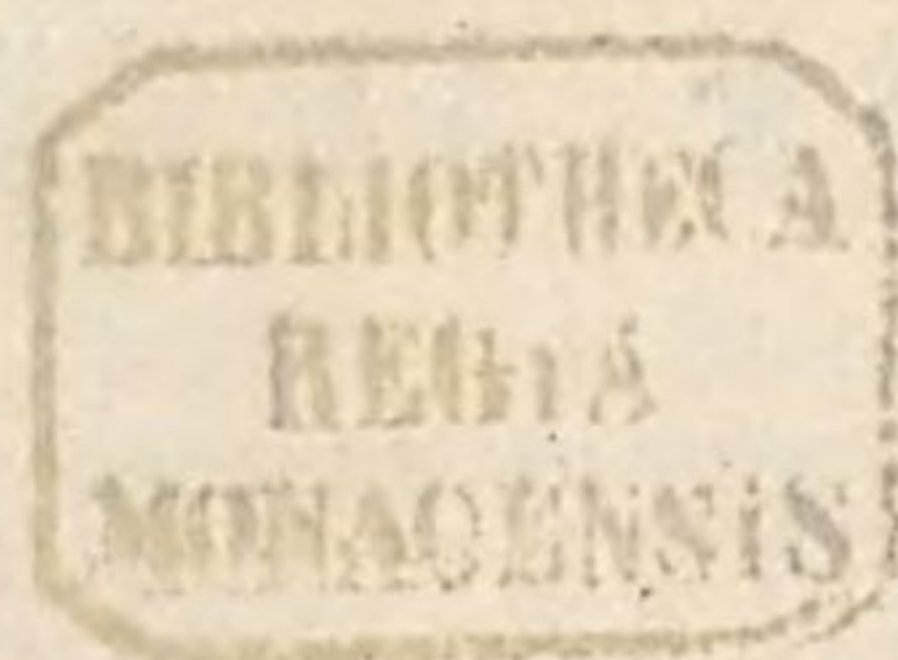
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VOL. II.



B R I S E I S

BY

WILLIAM BLACK,

AUTHOR OF

“A DAUGHTER OF HETH,” “MACLEOD OF DARE,”
ETC. ETC.

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I N T W O V O L U M E S.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1896.



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B R I S E I S.

CHAPTER I.

A DEPARTURE.

THE photographs were not there; but the Prince was; and forthwith young Gordon found himself haled off to a shop in Piccadilly, where he was bidden to choose a complete set of golfing implements, all of the most approved type.

“Golfing in Montevetro!” he protested. “Well, you won’t want for hazards! How many mountain-peaks to the course?”

“Oh, we shall do excellently,” said Monseigneur, with much confidence. “I know where will be a very good links. As for bunkers, plenty; as for turf, why you have not in England a better tennis-lawn than Stephenson—you remember, the British Chargé d’Affaires—has adjoining his house. We shall make out a golf-course well enough, do not you fear!”

Next Frank Gordon was dragged off to another shop in Piccadilly, where inquiries were made about a stag's head of fourteen points that had been sent to be stuffed and mounted; and minute instructions were given as to the safest method of transit by which the much-prized trophy could be conveyed to Sattaro on the Dalmatian coast.

And then again they pursued their way until they drew near to Brown's Hotel. Carriages were driving up; and from these there descended to cross the pavement, one after another, a number of distinctly foreign-looking personages, for Madame the Princess was at home this afternoon to certain of her friends.

"Pah!" said Monseigneur, peevishly. "What is it now! They will never get their £15,000 a year pension for King Milan, though they try to talk over each and every member of the Skupstchina, and his wife, and his mother, and his sister. He is a good man, King Milan, and he has done great service to his country, and better than all he is a well-wisher to Montevetro; but look at their finances—how are they to meet the next coupon?—"

They entered the hotel.

"Frank," said Monseigneur, in an undertone, "you come up stairs with me. We will slip by unnoticed. I wish to show you what Wiener schnitzel and Gurkensalat can do now: Wiener schnitzel, when he lays down the pipe,

gives a bark—that is his thanks for the smoke; and Gurkensalat she can get the pipe into her mouth with her paws, putting her head close to the table——”

But of course an affectionate and obedient son could not play such a shameless trick on his mother; so Frank Gordon, not to be seduced away from his duty, at once went into the drawing-room, and mixed among these strange folk, and endeavoured to make himself as polite and agreeable as his not very fluent French or German allowed. The Prince had for the moment disappeared—no doubt to make sure, first of all, that Wiener-schnitzel and Gurkensalat were not being neglected.

On this evening the Prince and Princess were dining at a certain Embassy—and young Gordon of Grantly had also received an invitation; and it was while the three of them were driving down to Belgrave Square that he got his earliest opportunity of putting in a word for poor Mrs. Elliott.

“You see, Mater,” he pleaded, when he had partly explained the circumstances, “blood is thicker than water—Scotch blood especially; and the old Scotch families should show a little clannishness; and not many of them have better claims than the Elliotts of the Lea. And you needn’t think it’s snobbery on the part of this poor woman; I don’t believe there’s an ounce of snobbery in her composition; but one can see how your

going there might give her a bit of a lift, don't you know; and I think she is in pretty hard straits——"

"Saturday?" repeated his mother. "It is practically a holiday-night for us, as it chances: we dine with the Von Hohenecks—and there was a talk of our trying to see an act or so of *Carmen*—but that is hardly possible——"

"In any case you could look in at Mrs. Elliott's on your way home," young Gordon pointed out directly.

"What do you say, Michael?" she asked, turning to her husband.

"If you wish it, yes," he answered with easy indifference: he generally submitted to be taken about, wherever she wanted, by his more energetic consort.

"Most likely there won't be anyone you know," her son continued. "But at least I want you to meet the Greek young lady about whom I told you—you remember——"

"Oh," she exclaimed, with her eyebrows elevated a bit, "is this, then, the house where the divine one scrubs the dishes?"

"It isn't that—or anything like that!" he rejoined, in tones of distinct annoyance. "Why do you put things so harshly—and so wrongly? You have merely heard what Aunt Jean had to say about her—along with some rumours coming from an Edinburgh lawyer. But if she is in that position, or anything approaching

to it, I know the reason: it is simply because she has got a sort of kindly and good-humoured acquiescence in her disposition; she doesn't know her own value; she doesn't stand on her rights; she seems so happy in herself that she would take any trouble to do anything for anyone." And then he altered his manner altogether. "Well, Mater, I'm not going to insist. You'll see and judge for yourself. But if there was any generosity about you, or sympathy, or a single spark of humanity or fellow-feeling, why, you'd just take this girl away with you, and keep her beside you as your companion and friend; and you could introduce her at Court—Vienna or anywhere; and I don't think you would have much reason to be ashamed of her! I should imagine not! She has every accomplishment; she speaks all kinds of languages; and she's just the most beautiful creature you ever set eyes on, with the most unselfish nature, and a charm of manner that is indescribable—— Oh, you may take my word for it you wouldn't have her long on your hands! The majority of men may be fools; but they're not such mortal fools as that. She's fitted to marry into any society; and of course she would marry well—instead of dragging out her life as a drudge in a sort of genteel boarding-house."

"Frankie, my lad," said the Princess, a little more gravely, "I fear my hands are a little too full for

me to make any such experiment—at present, at least.”

“But you’ll be kind to her on Saturday night,” he pleaded.

“Oh, no. Certainly not. I will taunt her with her poverty; and ask her by what right she has come up from the kitchen.”

“You will, will you?” said he, with a laugh. “Very well, what I know is this: she’ll make a poor, soft, ridiculous idiot of you before you’ve been three minutes within the influence of her eyes, and her smile.”

“Frankie,” said the Princess, as they were going up the Embassy stairs, “is this a trap you’ve laid for me?”

“When and where?” he exclaimed.

“Saturday night,” she replied. “Your language is rather warm about that young Greek lady——”

“Oh, nonsense, nonsense,” he said. “I was giving you a most unbiassed opinion. Mater, wait till you see. You know Aunt Jean is not very impressionable; and yet she just won Aunt Jean’s heart away from her.”

But stirring events were to happen before that Saturday night. When he got home from the Embassy, the first thing he saw on entering his rooms was a telegraphic envelope placed prominently on the mantelpiece. He opened it and read the contents—and these he found to be sufficiently surprising.

"Come down by first train to-morrow morning. Urgent. Rockminster, Adelphi Hotel, Liverpool."

And in an instant he had jumped to the conclusion that this mysterious summons was in some way connected with Georgie Lestrangle. She had been too shy to telegraph to him herself; so she had asked Lord Rockminster to do that for her—Rockminster who had been her host and in a manner her guardian at the date of her last writing. And were these two now in Liverpool? And why? Well, the only thing that remained for him was to hunt up *Bradshaw*; there he found that the morning train for Liverpool left Euston at 7.15; and then he sat down and wrote a note to his mother explaining that she must excuse his absence on the following day—until the evening, at all events; he would send her a more definite message as soon as he could ascertain what was wanted of him. His sleep that night was restless; and his waking moments full of uneasy suspense.

It was a little after noon when he reached Liverpool; and he went straight to the Adelphi Hotel; Lord Rockminster, as he perceived from a distance, was on the pavement outside, idly looking about him, and smoking a cigarette.

"Awfully good of you to come down," Rockminster said, when Frank Gordon arrived. "Fact is, I sent that telegram on my own responsibility——"

"But what's the matter?" the younger man demanded abruptly.

"If you want it cut short, then: Miss Lestrangle sails to-day in the *Barbaric*, for New York; and I thought you would like to know—I mean, I thought you might wish to see her before she left—— Now, look here, Gordon, one word of clear understanding," he went on—for Frank Gordon appeared too bewildered to put any questions, "I fancy there is something between Miss Georgie and you; but it is none of my business; and I don't want to be told anything about it. You understand? I know nothing—don't want to know. Only, she has seemed preoccupied and distressed out of all reason; and I was certain she hadn't sent you a telegram—mightn't like, perhaps—or may have thought writing would explain better—she's writing now, in the Ladies' Drawing-room; and last night I thought I would act on my own responsibility, without asking her any impertinent question—hope I haven't made an infernal mess of it——"

"But what is it all about? Why is she going to America? Why did she not tell me?" young Gordon demanded, with wide eyes.

"No time. Everything has been so hurried. Here, come into the coffee-room, and sit down; there won't be anybody about."

And indeed the long and spacious coffee-room was

practically empty, save for a passing waiter. These two took seats at a window table.

"You know her brother Percy," Rockminster began, in his usual imperturbable fashion; whatever whirl of incidents might be about was not likely to upset the equilibrium of his brain.

"I've heard of him—I've never seen him," Frank Gordon answered.

"Very nice fellow—clever, you know—awfully good at private theatricals and that sort of thing. But he got tired of loafing about Campden Hill and South Kensington; went to Florida; bought a partnership in a big fruit-growing concern, and was getting on well enough with his figs and oranges and bananas. Been to Florida?"

"Never."

"You may thank the Lord. Consists of oranges and swamps; and on a show of hands the swamps would have it. From this letter of his partner's it appears he was seized with some sort of malarial fever; got it precious bad; then I suppose they flooded him with quinine and bark; eventually they chased out the fever; and looked to his getting all right again as a matter of course. But he hasn't got all right—fearful depression and weakness—nervous system all broken down—cares for nothing—will not try to get up—sinking into a kind of hopeless apathy—cries for no reason

whatever—and only asks for rest—rest—until I can see they are afraid of his slipping off into a kind of rest that isn't in the reckoning. And he has been talking about his sister—in his half-delirious state imploring them to send for her. Well, of course all this upset Miss Georgie terribly, and she hardly knew what to do; when right on the heels of the letter comes a telegram saying that a Mr. and Mrs. Martinez de la Pena, neighbours of theirs out there in Florida, were returning by the *Barbaric*, and would bring her along with them if she were disposed to come. So you may imagine what telegraphing, and packing, and travelling has been crammed into the past thirty-six hours; but here we are at last—cabin secured, and everything; and all that lies before us now is an early luncheon and a leisurely getting aboard the tender." Rockminster had been lazily playing with the handle of one of the forks. He suddenly looked up. "I say, Gordon, if you think I've put my foot in this affair, by telegraphing for you, there is time for you to skip out and get back to the station; and I shall never breathe a word about your having been here."

"Of course not—of course not!" Frank Gordon made answer, almost indignantly. "I must see her—of course I must see her. And I may tell you this, Rockminster: you're not so far out in your surmise about her and myself—only—don't you see—nothing has been

formally communicated to anyone as yet. And I think it's awfully good of you to have taken all this trouble, and come right away down from Inverness-shire with her——”

“My good chap, what else could I do!” his companion protested, in his half-indifferent way. “But I must go and find her now.”

He had not to go very far; for at this precise moment Miss Georgie appeared at the door of the coffee-room, timidly looking round. When she saw who this was who rose to meet her, along with Lord Rockminster, she stood stock-still—she almost shrank back—as if she did not know whether to advance or retreat—as if she did not know what to think or what to say to him. And then again she pulled up a certain courage—though her face was flushed and embarrassed in a most unusual manner; she went forward and said “How do you do?” to him, as if this were quite an ordinary occasion; and then she turned to Lord Rockminster.

“Mr. and Mrs. De la Pena,” said she, “are asking when you propose to have lunch; they seem anxious to be in good time on board the tender——”

“We will have luncheon here and now,” said Rockminster, promptly—perceiving a chance of leaving these two together for a moment. “Where are the De la Penas?—in the writing-room? I will go and fetch them.”

And then as soon as he was gone she looked up.

"How did you know?" she said. "I have been writing to you—most of the morning—but the letter is in my pocket. I did not think telegraphing would be of any use—I could not explain. How did you know to come here?"

"Rockminster telegraphed to me last night," he answered her, simply enough.

"Lord Rockminster?" she repeated—and the embarrassment in her face did not grow less. "But—but did Lord Rockminster suspect—how did he come to assume——"

"He was quite right in assuming!" her companion said, boldly. "Of course he could not ask you questions you might think impertinent; but if he guessed that you would rather have me come to see you off, he was quite right in sending for me——"

"Oh, Frank, it's so kind of you—you always are so kind!" she said, in a low voice.

"And is your brother so very ill?" he asked.

"I will show you his partner's letter presently," said she, as she somewhat drew away from him—for Lord Rockminster and the swarthy-visaged De la Penas were now visible at the coffee-room door.

This unwonted constraint and timidity lasted all through luncheon. Perhaps she resented the inferences that these strangers would naturally draw from the

sudden arrival of this young man. Perhaps she was secretly wondering if the rest of the people at Glen Skean Castle shared in the assumption that had induced Lord Rockminster to telegraph for Frank Gordon. Or again she may have been tired with the long travelling; her mind was doubtless full of unrest about her brother; and she may have contemplated the unknown voyage and the subsequent journey with some natural nervousness. At all events, she was no longer the light-hearted, gay, audacious Georgie Lestrangle; even when they were going out on the brisk little tender, she paid no heed to the eagerly talkative people about her, nor did she care to look at the wide and busy river, with its innumerable small craft darting about in every direction, while the smoky sunlight was splintered in glints and gleams on the tawny surface of the current. She was as one dazed when she got on board the great ship, with its hurrying passengers, its officers, and the long row of stewards marshalled in array. It was Mrs. De la Pena who took her below, and found out her cabin for her, and deposited there the small parcels she had brought with her. And then she returned on deck again.

“Frank,” said she, in an undertone, “were you annoyed that — that Lord Rockminster should have guessed?”

“Good gracious, why?” said he.

“And—and do you think the other people at the Castle have been imagining the same thing?”

“I don’t know—but they are entirely welcome!” said he, with a decision that ought to have given heart of grace to this poor trembling lass who was half clinging to him.

“Here is the letter I meant to post to you,” she continued, and she covertly handed it to him. “You will find Percy’s address in it, if you care to write to me——”

“If I care to write to you!”

“And, Frank, don’t think of me as you see me now!” she pleaded. “This isn’t me at all. I’m frightened by the confusion. Long before we reach New York, I know I shall be as merry as a grig; and when I get to Branch Valley I shall cheer Percy up at once and set him quite right again. Don’t think of me as I am now——”

A bell rang for the second time.

“I must get back to the tender,” said he.

She moved with him to the end of the gangway, where Lord Rockminster was waiting to bid her farewell; and it was to Rockminster that she said good-bye first. Then she turned to young Gordon.

“Good-bye, Frank!” said she—and she lifted her face towards him—her eyes full of tears.

He said good-bye and kissed her—not caring how

many commercial travellers, of Liverpool or New York, might be looking on: indeed, these merry gentlemen were mostly engaged in calling messages to their friends on board the other vessel. Then he, too, had to pass along the gangway; and almost immediately thereafter the tender set off for the wharf, while the great ship began slowly and steadily to creep down stream. He stood on the paddle-box, waving a handkerchief until further recognition was impossible. And that was the last of poor, wild, wicked Georgie that he saw for many a long day to come.

Meanwhile an intimation that the Prince and Princess of Montevetro really meant to honour by their presence Mrs. Elliott's reception on Saturday night was sufficient to arouse a profound if partly concealed excitement throughout the house in Devonshire Place. Even the sullen and sluggish Brenda woke up to the possibilities of the occasion; the intractable spitfire Olga became quite submissive in her appeals for advice and assistance; and the three young ladies from the country secretly and separately telegraphed down to their relatives, announcing the momentous fact, and demanding authority for unlimited millinery outlay. But it was on the poor widow's shoulders that the burden of anxieties fell; insomuch that at times she was almost sinking into despair, and wishing she had never been so audacious as to prefer her breathless request. And then again

she would pull herself together, determined to make the most of her great opportunity. She could not now issue invitations "To meet the Prince and Princess of Montevetro"—for her cards had already been issued; but she could go to such of her acquaintances as had not yet been asked, and in a casual kind of way mention that these august personages were likely to illumine her poor house on Saturday evening, and would Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so, if they happened to have no other engagement, care to look in for a little while? Indeed, she asked everybody she could think of; for she knew that the bigger the crowd the less attention could be directed to worn carpets and shabby furniture. Then she went to a florist, and made a bargain with him about the loan of flowers for the supper table and the staircase landing. She had almost pathetic conversations with the confectioner about this or that small economy, and the resulting price per head. And all through these few and hurried days there dwelt in her mind a never-ending, rather an increasing, perplexity as to who among her more distinguished guests should take down whom to supper. Here are some of the solutions that presented themselves from time to time, amid all this wild worry of preparation:—

Sir F. Gordon—The Princess.

The Crowd.

The Prince—Hostess.

* * *

The Prince—The Princess.

Sir F. Gordon—Hostess.

The Crowd.

* * *

The Prince—Hostess.

The Crowd.

Sir F. Gordon—The Princess.

* * *

Sir F. Gordon—The Princess.

The Prince—Hostess.

The Crowd.

Nay, the longer she considered this problem the more hopeless it became, until in her desperation she resolved on doing nothing at all. Some accident would happen. Some involuntary movement among the people would lead them to choose such partners as were near them; and while the crowd, descending to the dining-room, would swarm along the buffet or occupy the scattered chairs, the small table at the upper end reserved for the Prince and Princess, Sir Francis Gordon, and their hostess would remain secure. She would talk to her illustrious guests on their way thither, as if not noticing what had occurred or was occurring. They would drop into their places as a matter of course; the white-gloved waiter would open the first bottle of champagne; and in a few moments a benignant and reassuring clamour would everywhere prevail.

And at length the great night arrived; all the gases and candles had been lit; the flowers arranged; the

supper table laid out in fair display; everything that mortal could do on scant means and within the strict confines of solvency had been done by the apprehensive but indomitable little widow; only—only—as quarter of an hour after quarter of an hour went by, and her rooms had got almost choke-full with the murmuring crowd she knew that if after all she was disappointed of her exalted guests then her very heart-strings would crack. She talked to this one and the other; but her nervous glances invariably returned to the door. She did not heed what was said to her; she forgot to notice whether her bonny darlings Olga and Brenda were looking their best; she could not even send Briseis off on some final errand of decoration: all her thoughts were concentrated on that empty doorway. And then, of a sudden, her longing eyes seemed to recognise a familiar face—handsome and sunburnt—out there in the semi-dusk; there was a tall young gentleman whose arrival was of the most joyous import; almost by his side there was a vision of a lady of imposing presence, all in white satin and lace and pearls; and following her came a stout gentleman who wore a broad blue ribbon across his waistcoat and a conspicuous diamond star close to the lapel of his coat. A kind of hush fell over the general conversation of the room—and that was in itself unnerving; but the little widow had steeled herself against this crisis; she advanced to the

Princess, and took her hand, and welcomed her with a few pretty words; and she was introduced to the Prince; and these two remained talking with her, while young Gordon passed on to pay his respects to Miss Olga and Miss Brenda. All the same, he was looking about a little. Where was Briseis, then? He could see no sign of her. And yet he had brought the Prince and Princess mainly that they should get to know something of Briseis Valieri; and who could tell at what moment Monseigneur, who was a whimsical sort of person, might not insist on getting away home?

And then he went back to Mrs. Elliott, meaning to ask her downright what had become of her niece. But just at this moment there slipped in at the doorway a tall and slim and graceful figure dressed entirely in black; and the new-comer seemed inclined to linger there, to be out of observation, as it were, while she could see all that was going on. Frank Gordon at once went up to her—delight in his eyes.

“I have been looking for you everywhere, Miss Valieri,” said he; “I want you to know my mother. Shall I bring her to you?”

“Oh, no, I will go with you.”

Indeed it was but a step or two; and the beautiful young Greek girl showed no hesitation in accompanying him; the next moment found her being presented to the Princess and her husband. Then Gordon, con-

sidering that Briseis Valieri might well be left to make her impression in her own way, withdrew from that little group, and wandered back to Olga and Brenda, and their chatter about the new pianist whose red head had set all feminine London on fire.

Now in what manner or under what direction her swarm of guests got themselves down to the supper-room, the agitated and all too happy Mrs. Elliott herself hardly knew; but the end of it was that the long apartment was speedily filled with an amorphous throng—the dowagers claiming the occasional chairs, the younger folk foraging at the buffet, or being attended to in quiet corners; while the Prince and Princess had been successfully navigated to the small table. They and their hostess took their places; but young Gordon remained standing—looking down the busy room.

“Won’t you be seated, Sir Francis?” the widow said to him—she was anxious to have the little party of four complete.

“Oh, no, thanks,” he said. “I would rather make myself useful—if I knew how——”

“Then go and fetch Miss Valieri,” his mother said to him, promptly. “Here is a place for her—and we were interrupted when she was telling me about Tricoupi——”

“Oh, Briseis?” interposed the little widow. “She is so very kind! She offered to remain in the drawing-

room, with my youngest son—the poor lad is lame, you know, Princess, and cannot get about very well——”

With that Frank Gordon moved away. He did not seem to have any particular aim. In fact he had to move slowly; for the place was crammed; and young men carrying oscillating things on plates were objects to be avoided. But at length he got out into the hall; he ascended the vacant staircase; he reached the landing. And here he paused.

For the door of the drawing-room was open an inch or so; and while he stood hesitatingly still there came to him a sound such as never before had fallen upon his ears. Piano-playing in general he rather detested; its mechanical, staccato tinkle-tank produced no effect on him—except irritation and a desire for quiet. But this strange melody that now he heard seemed to run and ripple in continuous cadences: measured, it is true, for it was clearly a dance—a joyous dance—soft, and elusive, and distant at times, and then again full and glad and clear as a thrush’s song on a May morning. Then it ceased; and there followed a kind of mysterious chant—a solitary voice, as musical as the music, pronouncing the words almost in monotone:

*The young maidens are merrily dancing,
Out in the sun the young maidens are dancing,
Their hands are linked around the olive-tree:
Little one, Marianoula, why dost thou weep?*

Again the dance-music: one can almost see the lithe limbs and the flowing draperies, the outstretched arm and swift-glancing foot, in the dappled shade under the olives. And again the low-voiced, plaintive recitative:

*Her lover came to the well,
With soft words her lover came to the well,
The red and white flowers of her heart were opened,
The red and white flowers of her heart were filled with dew:
Little one, Marianoula, why sittest thou apart?*

But now those running and rippling chords become more buoyant; the passing note of sadness is abandoned; the sinuous melody weaves itself into a happier strain. And the recitative that follows speaks welcome words:

*Lo! a stranger upon the road—
The road that comes winding from Zagora;
He bears in his hand a beautiful necklace:
Little one, Marianoula, the necklace is for thee.*

The music grows louder and more joyous; and then again it droops—it seems to draw near—it seems almost to whisper—it is a whisper that a maiden may understand;

*What are the jewels on the necklace?
The jewels are tears, the tears of absence:
Arise, Marianoula, and greet thy lover!
Little one, Marianoula, thou must dry his tears.*

Then there were a few notes of farewell—fading into silence.

The strange and extraordinary charm of this composition—the fascination and mysticism of the music, and the impression of dim remoteness, and pity, and tenderness conveyed by that low-toned voice—held him spellbound for a second or two; and he could not move. It was as if sleep were around him—and dreams—and an inexpressible consciousness of the tragedy of human life. And then—for he was here on a mission—he strove to throw off this magic web of entrancement; he stepped up to the door and opened it; and looking into the large and empty room he found that Briseis had turned from the piano and was talking to her boy-cousin Adalbert.

“I have been sent for you, Miss Valieri,” he said. “My mother wants you to sit by her—she has kept a place for you——”

“I cannot do that, Sir Francis,” she answered, smiling-eyed, “for I have been left in charge. But if you wouldn’t mind staying with Adalbert for a few minutes, I should like to go down and get some supper for him—I know the things he prefers——”

Young Gordon accepted the post with great goodwill; and Briseis left the room.

“What was that your cousin was singing and playing before I came in?” he asked.

“Oh, that?” replied the lame lad. “That? That was one of the things she makes out of her own head,

you know. You see, she and I go into the Park every morning at twelve; and she reads to me; but it would be rather scudgy of me, wouldn't it, to keep her always at those reports of cricket and football that a girl can't care about? And so I sometimes read for myself; and then I can see that she sits thinking—but not very seriously either—it's about the verses, you know—sometimes they're little Polish songs, and sometimes Hungarian, and sometimes Armenian—but there's always an English version for me. And although she's kept awfully busy in the house, now and again the others are away at an afternoon concert, or something of that kind—and she's generally left at home with me—and she asks me to come in here for a little while—and she plays—well, did you ever hear such playing?—she can make the piano speak—it says anything she wants to say—and then between she recites the verses—so low—I wonder you could have heard——”

At this point the door was again opened. But it was not Briseis who appeared; it was Olga Elliott, carrying a plate and a spoon and fork; and the moment that Gordon set eyes on her he saw that something was wrong.

“Yes, you may well stare!” said she—and her lips were pale with passion. “That I should be ordered to fetch and carry things like a kitchen-maid—sent away from the room—while Briseis Valieri is singled out,

and taken up, and put at the Prince's table! The—the upstart! She and her shabby black rags—when all the rest of us had been at such pains——”

“Cousin Briseis,” said the small lame boy, with his face afire, “dresses better than any of you—and that always—always!——”

“Here, take this rubbish—and I hope it may choke you!” exclaimed the scowling-eyed fury, and she thrust the plate upon him. “A seat reserved for Briseis Valieri, at the Prince's table!—and I dare say she wasn't asked at all—I dare say it was her own downright impudence that made her force her way——”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Olga,” said Frank Gordon—but mildly, for he had never seen a girl of decent upbringing in such an ungovernable rage before, and in fact he was rather frightened. “The Princess sent me to find Miss Valieri——”

“Then does the Princess know in whose house she is?” demanded this sallow-complexioned virago with the flaming eyes. “She was invited here by a family called Elliott. I am an Elliott. I'm not a foreigner. But I've got to go for aspic jelly—I am sent away from the room—while a foreign creature in a dingy black dress is taken to the Prince's table—with everybody looking on!——”

“It is not a dingy black dress—it is the prettiest

dress in the whole house!" the lame boy retorted, panting a little.

But this stormy scene had to end; for there were sounds outside, of people ascending the staircase; and the very first to put in an appearance was the Prince himself, who was accompanied by Briseis Valieri—the Princess having been detained below by Mrs. Elliott, to run the gauntlet of introductions. Monseigneur was talking in German; and he was laughing consumedly; and so occupied was he with this subject of Wiener-schnitzel and Gurkensalat that he seized two chairs, and made Briseis sit down with him, that he might the better describe to her the irresistible drolleries of his two black poodles. But when the Princess came up, Briseis was released from durance; for Frank Gordon's mother seemed to have a great deal to say to this Greek girl, and to be much interested in her, and charmed with her, as all this miscellaneous assemblage could clearly perceive.

As they were driving down to Brown's Hotel—and, indeed, almost as soon as they had left the house—Frank Gordon said to his mother:

"Well, Mater, what have you to say about the Maid of Athens?"

The Princess of Monteveltro—as she sometimes did, for caprice or amusement—lapsed into the Scotch tongue.

“Frankie, lad, I thought ye were just bletherin when ye spoke of her; but I find ye were not. She’s just a witch of a lassie, that—with her great, big eyes, and the smiling daintiness of her, and her pretty voice: she’ll make many a man’s heart sore, will that one. Keep out of her way, Frankie; keep out of her way; that’s my advice to ye.”

“I?” he said, in some little astonishment. And then he added, quietly: “You don’t understand, Mater. I shall be sending you a letter one of these days.”

CHAPTER II.

A SQUIRE OF DAMES.

A FEW days after these occurrences, and between one and two in the afternoon, Frank Gordon drove up to Mrs. Elliott's house in Devonshire Place, jumped out of the hansom, ascended the steps, and rang the bell. After a little delay a maidservant appeared.

"Can I see Mrs. Elliott?" he asked.

"They're at luncheon," she said, looking troubled.

"Yes, I know. But I want to speak to her for only a moment. Will you tell her, please? No, thanks, I won't go up to the drawing-room; I will wait here."

He remained in the hall, while the girl disappeared into the dining-room, leaving the door open. Apparently there was some disputatious argument going on within; but, as he could plainly hear, it was wound up by a contemptuous declaration on the part of the fiery-tempered Olga.

"It's all rubbish this trying to talk French among ourselves!" she maintained, with scornful emphasis. "We ought to be taken over to Dieppe or Boulogne for a month or two months every year—then we might

have a chance. As it is, we simply go blundering on without knowing it; and what fools we should make of ourselves if we went to Paris! I wonder what the Parisian dentist thought when the English girl went into his place and said to him, 'Monsieur, s'il vous plaît, examinez mes dentelles.' ”

At this moment the much-harassed mother made her appearance; and directly she saw who her visitor was her face—the poor, worn, enduring face—lit up with pleasure and gratitude.

“Won't you come in, Sir Francis?—we are just having luncheon——”

“Oh, no, thank you,” he said. “I have called only for a second. But it is to ask a great favour of you, Mrs. Elliott——”

And what favour could he ask that she was not eager to grant? It was he who had assisted her in a higher ambition than any she had ever dreamed of; already, as the fruit of an industrious sowing of little paragraphs, several of the morning journals had announced that on the previous Saturday evening the Prince and Princess of Monteveltro had been present at a reception given by Mrs. Alexander Elliott, of — Devonshire Place; this piece of intelligence, she knew, would be copied into many of the weekly papers, especially those devoted to the doings of womankind; and there was no end to the flattering hopes that had now got

possession of her brain. She saw more applicants for introduction to fashionable society; she saw her terms raised from £400 to £600 per annum; she saw her darling girls made much of and asked to go everywhere; she saw Edward the medical student entered for his three years at Caius College. And what indulgent kindness or courtesy should she withhold from the young man who had done so much for her?

“Mrs. Elliott,” said he, “I want you to put all your young ladies under my charge for an hour or so this afternoon. An artist friend of mine has just come back from China—been house-boating and sketching there for over eighteen months—and his drawings are now hung in Lucas’s exhibition rooms on Bond Street. This is the opening day—private-view day, rather—and he’s an old friend of mine; I should like him to have a good crowd, to show that there was public interest; and I’m sure, if you’ll entrust me with your young ladies, I will take every care of them——”

“Oh, but they will be delighted to go!” she exclaimed, cheerfully—it was such an easy way of granting a favour!

“Shall I call for them at three, or half past?” he inquired.

“Perhaps half past three would be better,” said the widow—for she knew what a tumult of preparation would shortly prevail throughout the house. Then she

hesitated. "Did you say all of them, Sir Francis? There are Olga and Brenda—I know they are free; and Miss Bingham, and Miss Tressider, and Miss Holmes, I'm sure they will be most pleased to go. But as for Briseis—Miss Valieri, you know—she and I had planned out some bits of household work for the afternoon; and perhaps you would be so kind as to excuse her——"

He flushed—flushed like a schoolboy; and for a moment seemed quite taken aback. But the next instant he had adventured upon a course that admits of neither palliation nor excuse.

"Oh, but didn't I tell you," he stammered (inventing as he went on) "that my friend Heatherstone has some Scotch sketches too—Aberdeenshire—it was in Aberdeenshire I first met him years ago; and these are almost sure to be on exhibition—perhaps in a separate room—or on screens, you know. And I am certain Miss Valieri would be so interested in them—if you don't mind, Mrs. Elliott—if it isn't putting you about—I should so much like Miss Valieri to renew her acquaintance with the Aberdeenshire hills——"

"Oh, very well, Sir Francis," said the widow, rather wondering at his unnecessary insistence. "But what a handful you will have!"

"I shall be here punctually at half past three," said he. "And thank you ever so much!" And with that he departed—directing the cabman to drive him forth-

with to a certain restaurant in Bond Street. It was not of his own personal requirements he was thinking.

And perhaps he had not entered into any minute analysis of the motives that had led him to embark on this project. For one thing, his time was entirely at his own disposal, now that the Prince and Princess were on their way to Buda-Pesth; and then again Mrs. Elliott was a countrywoman of his, and here was an opportunity of paying her a little compliment; and no doubt Fred Heatherstone would be glad of any addition to the assemblage meandering through the exhibition rooms. But behind and apart from these considerations there was a vague recollection of his having spoken indiscreetly to the old botanist and his niece about a Dee-side welcome; and he wished Briseis Valieri to know that Dee-side folk were not neglectful; generally speaking, he wanted to make atonement—for a wrong that had never been committed. And so he was most exacting in his arrangements with the head-waiter at this restaurant; and he had little sprays of flowers provided to be placed on the table, one for each young lady, when they should come out to have tea; and finally, in course of time, he returned with two four-wheeled cabs to Devonshire Place. Then, as the half-dozen girls went three and three into the two vehicles, he had his choice; and he chose that one in which Briseis was seated—perhaps because she was a sort of half-stranger in London and thus especially

his guest; or perhaps because her eyes chanced to meet his, and they were full of a kindly pleasure and thanks; or perhaps because he had got into a way of rather liking to hear the sound of her voice, which was extremely soft and musical. Anyhow he and she sat opposite each other on their way down to Bond Street; and it was mainly to her that he gave an account of his friend Fred Heatherstone, his position in the art world, and the class of people who for the most part formed his patrons.

It was Fred Heatherstone himself who received them—a youngish man of extraordinarily clear blue eyes, a fresh complexion, and clipped brown beard and moustache; and very polite he was to Frank Gordon's little group—though it was to Briseis that his regard was continuously and covertly returning; and when a move was made towards an examination of the pictures, it was Briseis with whom he ranged himself, proposing to go round with her.

"The sketches can't tell everything, you know," said he, in a modest, shy way. "And we had a few adventures on the Chinese canals."

As for Miss Bingham, and Miss Tressider, and Miss Holmes, and the two sisters Olga and Brenda, the ever-arriving crowd and the more striking of the costumes afforded them sufficient occupation; but of course they had to make a perfunctory survey of the framed draw-

ings; and it was while they were so engaged that Frank Gordon chanced to espy, near the turnstile, a young lady to whom he had been introduced at the Hypatia Club. Being of a bold, not to say reckless, nature, he ventured to approach this damsel, although he knew her occupation, and could perceive that she held a little note-book half hidden in her hand.

"I'm afraid you won't remember me, Miss Caledon," he said, as he raised his hat. "It was Miss Lestrangle who was kind enough to——"

"Oh, but I've got you down, Sir Francis," said she, with a half-sarcastic smile: she evidently took it for granted that his object in addressing her was to get his own name into the newspapers: she had had an early and sad experience of the ways of the world, had this comely young lass with the wild blonde hair and the alert gray eyes. "But perhaps you can help me—would you mind?—there are one or two whom I don't recognise, though they appear to be attracting some attention. Who is the short, soldierly man with the grizzled mustache—do you see him over there in the corner—the lady with him can't be his wife, for he's so awfully attentive to her——"

Well, Frank Gordon's acquaintance with the fashionable or artistic circles of London was far from being over-extensive; but at least he knew a number of those present as friends of his friend Heatherstone; and he

did what he could to assist this frank-spoken and pleasant-looking young person. Then she said—

“You brought in quite a big party with you.”

“Yes,” he made answer—arriving at last at this real object in going up to her. “And there are two of them you might put down in your list, Miss Caledon—it would be so good of you—their mother would be so pleased——”

“Yes, but is there anything special about their costume?—or have they done anything?” she said, rather petulantly.

“Oh, never mind about that,” he said. “There they are—just beyond the marble figure—Miss Olga Elliott and Miss Brenda Elliott—their mother would be so awfully pleased——”

She scribbled down the names, rather unwillingly. Then she said—

“But didn’t that beautiful girl come in with you—that tall, foreign-looking girl who is going round with Mr. Heatherstone? She is carrying everything before her—don’t you notice?—everyone following her with their eyes whenever there’s a chance—didn’t she come in with your party?”

He rather drew back in manner.

“Oh—well—yes—she did,” he admitted, in a distant kind of fashion.

“Who is she?” was the next prompt demand.

"Oh, I wouldn't put her in your list," he said, uneasily. "Oh, no, never mind!—I'm sure you've got enough down——"

"But I tell you she promises to be the chief feature of the afternoon: I must have her name!" the lady-journalist protested—and the little note-book was again opened.

"I've forgotten it," he said, in desperation.

"Forgotten her name? And she is one of your party?" the young damsel exclaimed, staring at him.

"Oh, no, I did not mean that. What I mean is that it is so difficult to spell—Greek names are very difficult to spell in English—changing the *u* into *y* and the *x* into *ch* and all that kind of thing. I really couldn't undertake—— But I see my young people are looking about for me—good-afternoon, Miss Caledon, and thank you ever so much!" He shook hands with her, and raised his hat, and turned away to lose himself in the crowd. And thus it was that in the account which appeared in one or two evening papers—to be copied in numerous weekly publications—of the distinguished throng who had flocked to Mr. F. Heatherstone's Private View, there were to be found the names of Miss Olga and Miss Brenda Elliott, but no mention was made of any Greek young lady having been present. Perhaps Frank Gordon could not have ex-

plained to himself the origin of this little bit of proud reserve on his part.

In the mean time Briseis, having gone the round of the walls, was now engaged in talking to the artist's mother—a singularly refined-looking old lady, with silvery-white hair and an almost girlish freshness of complexion; and it was at this point that young Gordon came up with the proposition that as he was about to take his small troop of guests to have tea at the restaurant where he had had a table reserved for them, Mrs. Heatherstone and her son might as well come too. The invitation was at once accepted; the girls were noiselessly summoned; and a short time thereafter they were all of them seated together in the tea-room, chatting and laughing as if newly released from bondage. To be sure, there were only six sprays of flowers; but the moment she saw how matters lay, Briseis, on pretence of putting her gloves and catalogue on the windowsill, passed round the table to Mrs. Heatherstone's chair and slipped her own tiny nosegay in front of the old lady. No one noticed—except young Gordon of Grantly; who thought that sooner or later he might have an opportunity of making up to Miss Valieri for that little act of self-sacrifice.

As it turned out, this expedition from end to end proved to be a complete success; and when eventually he had convoyed his charges home, and when he turned

away to walk down to his club, he was very well content with the experiment. He did not stay to consider whether there might not be a certain dangerous facility about it. He was in London, thrown very much on his own resources; most of his friends and chums and outlying kinsmen were away in the country; he himself did not propose returning to Aberdeenshire until Christmas, for he had several shooting engagements to get through, in Norfolk and Sussex; and meanwhile there was a kind of odd amusement in taking a drove of girls about, while he was doing a good turn to his countrywoman, Mrs. Elliott, in leaving the house quiet for her. The spitfire Olga was almost kind to him; the sulky and sullen Brenda was quite clearly trying to be amiable; the three bucolics were as merry as crickets; while as for Briseis Valieri, her bright intelligence, her serene sweetness, and the compelling splendour of her eyes were obvious to everyone, and why should he alone of mortals refuse to yield to their attraction? He treated her as he treated the others—or he thought he did. And at the present moment he was on his way down to the Sirloin Club, where he intended before dinner to write a long letter to Georgie Lestranger—poor Georgie who, instead of wandering round picture-rooms, and looking at pretty costumes, and having sprays of flowers placed for her at the tea-table, was now away on the wild Atlantic, with a world of uncertainties before her.

He might have gone down to the Oxford and Cambridge and taken his chance of finding someone he knew; but the Sirloin is a small and extremely exclusive club; no stranger or guest is admitted within its doors; members are expected to talk to each other, if they are that way inclined, whether they have met before or not; accordingly he was sure of having companionship at dinner, even if his neighbour puffed cigarette smoke into his soup—for the one chamber at the Sirloin serves as dining-room, smoking-room, and reading-room combined. As he entered the long and high-ceilinged apartment it looked invitingly snug on this chill October evening; there was a big fire blazing at the further end; there were rose-shaded lamps on the snow-white table; everything seemed neat, and trim, and well-appointed; and the row of old silver jugs and tankards and snuff-boxes—the gifts of loyal members—lent a certain richness of look to the eighteenth-century sideboard. There were but three persons present as yet: the ducal founder of the institution was seated at a small table, scanning the pages of the candidates' book; a famous musical entertainer lay at full length on a sofa, perhaps trying to make up for late nights; a callow youth, elegantly dressed, and chewing a toothpick, was blankly staring at this or the other of the valuable engravings that were ranged along the walls. A profound silence reigned: young Gordon of Grantly would have undisturbed seclu-

sion for the writing of the letter that was to follow Miss Georgie across the far Atlantic.

It was a frank and friendly letter—and extremely sensible: there were in it none of the endearing banalities, the secret meanings, the “little language” that lovers are used to send to each other. He said he was anxiously awaiting her telegram from New York; he hoped she would find her brother much better; he looked forward to the time when he should be walking up and down the wharf at Liverpool to welcome her on her return. And then, having finished this communication—and being still in a dutiful mood—he took another sheet of paper, and composed a brief note for his mother. According to promise, he said, he was writing to her; and the object of his writing was to tell her that he was engaged to Miss Georgie Lestrangle. Probably, he hinted, it was no great news to her—after the constant association she must have observed at Glen Skean Castle; nevertheless Georgie would be so pleased if the Princess would send her a kindly little message, and he would see that it was duly conveyed to her. When Frank Gordon had closed and addressed these two letters and deposited them in the box, he rose and looked round about him, with something of the air of being a free man.

The first newcomer he noticed was a well-known actor-manager, whose picturesque and effective *Hamlet*

was just then the talk of theatrical circles; and this gentleman, when he had ordered the bit of fish and glass of claret he permitted himself on the way down to the theatre, came over to Gordon.

"I saw you leaving Heatherstone's show this afternoon," said he; "there were a lot of you."

"Yes, rather a responsibility, all those girls."

Then of a sudden an idea sprang into Frank Gordon's brain. He had nothing to do in this town of London; and taking those girls about was a kind of harmless frolic.

"I say," he observed to the actor-manager, who was drawing in a chair to the table, "I should like to bring that little crowd to see your *Hamlet*; and it would be an additional point of interest—it would interest them tremendously—if they could be admitted behind the scenes for a minute or two——"

"Against all law and order," was the very definite response.

"But who makes a law can break it," said Gordon, enigmatically. "And I'll let you off easy; I'll bring only three instead of six. And only a couple of minutes—we should not interfere with anybody——"

This modern representative of Hamlet the Dane was a reflective person. He was also an angler; and occasionally he took his holidays in Scotland. Furthermore, he had heard that Sir Francis Gordon of Grantly

was the fortunate possessor of some fine stretches of water on the Dee.

“What evening do you propose?” he said.

“Well—to-morrow—or the next—if I find they are disengaged.”

“Make it Thursday evening if you can,” said the Prince Hamlet, as his frugal repast was being set before him. “Bring the three young ladies to my box—I will leave your name—and we will see what can be done.”

It seemed so simple and natural that he should again think of these pleasant companions. And Mrs. Elliott—who was devoted heart and soul to the young man, and ready to do everything he asked—made no objection when he explained to her that on this occasion he could only take Miss Olga and Miss Brenda and Briseis, because he did not wish to overtax the manager’s forbearance. When Olga and Brenda learned that they were going to a private box at the famous theatre, and also that they were to be introduced to the mysteries behind the scenes, they were out of their mind with importance and delight; but all the same they were shrewd enough to guess that this was in reality only another compliment to their cousin Briseis, paid her by the handsome young gentleman whose acquaintance she had made in Aberdeenshire. And the worst of it was that Briseis—who was not at all a vain person,

but who had quick perceptions, along with the fine and subtle sensitiveness of a woman in respect of any attention paid to her by one of the opposite sex—the worst of it was that Briseis thought so too.

Indeed it was this very swiftness of apprehension on her part that in the present stage of their companionship constituted for him her chiefest charm. She seemed to divine what he had to say before he had half said it; she was instantly responsive to the least hint or suggestion; there was an answering look—a smile of recognition—as if further words were unnecessary. And then he never appealed to her, for confirmation of his own views, or for further intelligence, and found her wanting. For one thing she was far more widely read than he—in many literatures; she had a more catholic appreciation of the arts (he cared for little beyond landscape, and for statuary hardly anything at all); young as she was, she had travelled more and seen more than he; she had more of the accomplishments and manners of the great world—though indeed his modesty, and good-humour, and manliness were sufficient to make up for any defect. And Olga and Brenda had soon got into the way of leaving these two to their half-uttered interchanges of confidence and comment. Here, for example, in the famous actor's box, the two sisters were well content to occupy themselves with the glow and pageantry of the stage, while

Briseis, in her curtained corner, could without being overheard talk to her companion about any feature of the performance that seemed to call for remark. It mattered little to Olga and Brenda whether they had, or had not, been brought to this theatre really on account of their cousin Briseis; it was enough that they were there—and in a prominent box; and they were making the most of a great opportunity.

Then came the fateful summons from the lord Hamlet himself; and at once the two girls were on their feet, and eager; while Frank Gordon got down Briseis's opera-cloak. She, however, put up her hand with a little gesture, and indicated her dissent.

"Aren't you coming with us?" he said.

"Oh, no, thank you; no, thank you," she answered him, and her eyes gave him one of their sweetest smiles. "I prefer to remain with the illusion. Why should I wish to see Ophelia dabbing her face with a powder-puff? I understand that such things are; but I do not wish to see them; I would rather stay here—to look at Shakespeare's dream of Denmark."

"Oh, do come!" he said, in obvious disappointment: for surely it was for her sake alone that he had begged for this favour?

But she was obdurate, in her suave and gentle fashion.

"I am like a child, I prefer illusions," she said,

good-naturedly. "And I am old enough not to tear open my toys."

And so, with an unwillingness that he was polite enough to conceal, he proceeded to escort the two sisters as they followed the attendant who was still waiting for them. When, after the lapse of a quarter of an hour, Olga and Brenda reappeared, they were laden with sumptuous boxes of chocolate and signed photographs, and they were quite excited and breathless over the wonders they had beheld.

And so it went on from day to day, or rather on alternate or occasional days: art-galleries, exhibitions, concerts, theatres; and sometimes the bucolics were asked, and sometimes the two sisters, but always Briseis; while as for the poor, tired-eyed little widow, so far from putting in any protest, she was glad enough to see her young people being taken about and amused. Briseis became of importance in this household. To all of them it seemed sufficiently clear that, although Sir Francis appeared to maintain an attitude of easy impartiality, these continuous plans and entertainments were unmistakably so many little presents offered to Briseis; and in private conclave they decided that she also must be well aware of the fact; and perhaps they envied her a lover who could be so lavish of his time and trouble.

Moreover, they could not but observe, as the days

went by, that there was something gradually being added to the girl's expression. Beautiful she had always been, even in her saddest and loneliest moments; but now that rare loveliness of hers seemed to bask in a sort of sunlight. To kindness of any description she had always been extraordinarily sensitive and responsive; but now the happiness that shone in her eyes seemed a species of radiance, even as she went about her ordinary duties. And she was busier than ever, of her own free will; anxious to do a good turn to this one or that; as if her whole nature were pervaded by a joyous and secret gratitude, that she must express in some way or other to her fellow-creatures. Of all the bits of embroidery and finery that she had brought with her from Eastern climes, hardly one remained: she had given them all away, to the other girls in the house.

But if Frank Gordon, as he carelessly thought, had preserved an attitude of unbiassed and benevolent neutrality towards these young ladies who had been so kind as to lend him their society, there was one point on which he was desirous of establishing a dark and esoteric understanding with Briseis alone: he wished to get to know more about the mysterious little songs or chants which she was in the habit of composing when she had an idle moment or two, and which for the most part she kept hidden away in her own memory.

He wanted her to write down some of these things for him. But she laughingly put him aside.

"It is all plagiarism," she said to him one afternoon as they were walking home from a concert at St. James's Hall: he and she were in front, the three bucolics behind. "I know many of the airs of the folk-songs; and I take one of them, and play round about it, and make foolishness of it; and what use would such a rambling kind of music be to you?"

"I don't so much mean the music: I mean the words," he said.

"And these too are only echoes," she went on. "I know so many of the ballads—Polish, Russian, and Romaic[†] especially—and so many of them are alike; so that if I wish for a refrain, it is easy to put together a few words—a little story—a suggestion——"

"Then won't you write down one or two of them for me?" he begged of her, renewing his prayer. "Those I have heard are most exquisite—so simple and tender——"

She laughed again, and shook her head.

"Oh, then you wish me to become like the poetess you met at the ladies' club—giving scraps of her compositions to her friends?"

"What, Miss Penguin?" he exclaimed. "Oh, yes, you are likely to resemble the draggled-tailed 'Sappho'"

*) Ρωμαϊοί = Παρρηϊοί
= modern Greek

in any way whatever! Besides I hear that 'Sappho' has given up gasping poetry for the present; her hysterics have taken another form—infuriated magazine-articles; and she is raging and howling and lashing the vices and follies of mankind with whips of scorpions—the gay old spinster that she is!”

“And then, you know,” said Briseis, with blithe unconcern, “these songs are all so sad; and why should one seek sadness unnecessarily?” Indeed, any passer-by, chancing to notice the happy eyes and the free and buoyant step of this girl, would have found it difficult to associate her with any form of sadness. Youth, and a serene sweetness of look, and the satisfaction of pleasant companionship—these were visible in her face; but not sadness. It would have been hard to believe that those beautiful, smiling eyes had ever burned hot with tears, or were ever likely to do that. “There is one of the Russian songs,” Briseis continued, “that they sing at a wedding—the friends of the bride sing it as a kind of chorus—and that too is sad—why? Why should it be so? The bride is represented as trembling for fear, and she hides for safety in her mother’s love—ah, but it is too tragic to be spoken of. And why—why? Why should there be dread and evil presentiments on a wedding-day?”

For a moment something seemed to clutch at his

heart. But only for a moment: he had acquired the habit of shutting out the future from him.

“Dread and evil presentiments on a wedding-day?” he repeated, absently. “Why, indeed?”

CHAPTER III.

AN AWAKENING.

THE cold and clear October sunlight shone over Regent's Park; from the rustling branches an occasional yellow leaf fluttered down and floated on the silvery and shimmering waters of the lake; the wide open swaths and undulations of greensward were almost empty; and far away beyond these the encircling belt of chestnut and sycamore and elm had grown dim and distant in the pale blue London haze. In a sheltered nook within this great solitude Briseis and her lame cousin had sought out their accustomed retreat; and she was reading to him, with that proud thrill in her voice that could make of his tremulous, emotional nature a sort of stringed instrument answering to her every touch:

“Now, God be praised, the day is ours. Mayenne hath turned his rein.

D'Aumale hath cried for quarter. The Flemish count is slain. Their ranks are breaking like thin clouds before a Biscay gale; The field is heaped with bleeding steeds, and flags, and cloven mail——”

Someone approached; and, as was her wont on such occasions, she merely lowered her tones, and continued her reading, without looking up. The stranger was a young man of about five-and-twenty, of a complexion so bloodless that its waxen pallor had a suggestion of green here and there in the shadows; his eyes were small, black, furtive, and abnormally close together; his small black mustache was carefully pointed at the ends; his features were of the degenerate Hellenic type that one frequently observes in the streets of Algiers or on the quays of Syracuse. As for his costume, there was a sort of Bank Holiday display about it; he wore a broad turned-down collar, a pretentiously arranged tie, prominent cuffs with large silver links, and a straw hat with a black band round it: there was also a black band round his arm. He had been surveying this little group of the two cousins before he ventured to draw near; but now he came close up, and stood motionless; so that Briseis was forced to raise her head.

“Andreas!” she exclaimed.

There was neither welcome, nor misgiving, nor alarm in the look with which she regarded him: only blank astonishment, even bewilderment.

“Yes, no doubt you are surprised?” he said, speaking in Romaic.¹ “May one sit down? Thank you. No, I do not suppose you have heard anything of me since the time that Irene was taken away from us. Poor

¹(p. 53) modern Greek

Enie!—poor Enie!” He glanced at the black band on his sleeve. “And yet it was her death that was the beginning of my misfortunes. I had got a very good post in the French consulate at Smyrna; but I had to give it up when I left to administer the family affairs at home; and since then I have——” He threw out his hands with a little expressive gesture. “I have drifted——drifted until I find myself here in London, talking to my old friend Briseis Valieri, as if we were once more on the beach promenade at Phalerum.”

She did not seem overjoyed.

“I was very sorry to hear of poor Enie’s death,” she said, “but she had been suffering for so long, had she not? And you—what are your plans? Have you come to London on business?”

The coldness of her tone seemed to indicate that she was not anxious to detain this young man with the shifty, watchful eyes and the showy neckerchief and cuffs.

“Business?—yes!” he said, slightly shrugging his shoulders. “If so great and rich a city as London can find enough to satisfy the very humble requirements of Andreas Argyriades. But in the mean time—at this moment—I am here on a little friendly errand to yourself.”

“To me? Why to me?” she demanded. She could

scarcely conceal her dislike—her impatience to be quit of him.

“Your young companion here,” he asked, as a cautious preliminary, “does he understand our language?”

“No,” she answered, shortly.

“Ah, then, so much the easier,” he said, in a suave fashion; and he seemed to settle himself comfortably down to tell his story. “You know, my dear friend, how methodical our poor Enie was—so perfect in all her dispositions; and the same orderliness I found when I had to examine her effects, for that duty also devolved upon me. So that, in going through her *escritoire*, when I came upon a packet neatly tied up and labelled outside ‘The Love-Letters of Briseis’—”

Briseis started. But he appeared to take no notice.

“——I said to myself: ‘Ah, then, Irene wished to be an authoress: here is the MS. all prepared and ready to go to the publisher.’ Nevertheless, when I opened the package, I discovered that the writing was not Irene’s writing, but that of her dear friend and companion, Briseis Valieri; and I said to myself: ‘Well, if it is she who aspires to be an authoress, that also is very good.’ And I read a little—oh, such beautiful language—such elegant French—such impassioned descriptions of stolen interviews—moonlight—in the groves of Zante—and I said to myself: ‘Surely this little book, when it is published, will create some stir: it will show

to all the world that our Greek girls of the present day have fire, imagination, enthusiasm?' But when I read further and further, what was my astonishment! These love-letters were not exercises in literature—ah, no!—they were addressed to one whom we all know very well—to George Lamprinos———”

A crimson flush had mounted to her forehead: the little lame boy in the Bath chair, looking and listening and wondering, had never before seen his pale and beautiful cousin so confused and distressed.

“Where are those letters?” she said, in a low voice.

“They are in London,” he answered her, gently.

“And in your possession?”

He nodded assent.

“Have you brought them with you?”

“Ah, no—they are too valuable to carry about with one———”

“Valuable?” she repeated, indignantly. “They are valuable to no one! But they are mine; and I demand to have them sent to me at once. By what right do you keep them back for a moment? It was most wicked of Irene to preserve them———” She checked herself—for she was speaking of the dead. “At least she knew they were to be destroyed———”

“But poor Enie was always so methodical,” Argyriades murmured, as he played with the silver links of his red-striped cuffs.

"I must have those letters, and at once," Briseis said, peremptorily. "They belong to me: I demand that you send them to me at once."

"Oh, yes, truly and certainly, my dear friend," he responded, in a placid manner. "But consider for a moment. In this world it is everyone for himself; especially when one is in hard straits, as I am. And it is so fortunate for you that those letters fell into my hands—ah, now, if it had been my brother Demetri who had got hold of them, what a position would be yours! Demetri has a heart of stone; he would have said to himself 'With these compromising letters in my possession——'"

"They are not compromising letters—as you know perfectly well!" she broke in, scornfully.

"They speak for themselves," he replied, with a quiet smile. "But calm yourself, my dear friend. It is not Demetri who has the letters: it is I. Demetri would have said 'Here is a rich young lady, who has rich friends and relatives: with these confessions in my hands, I can extort what I please: my fortune is made.' But I am not such as that. No. I only ask for a little consideration. It has been at great cost to myself that I have brought these documents all the way from Athens——"

She had recovered her composure by this time.

"You could not have sent them to me!" she said,

in open disdain. "There is no service of posts between Greece and England!"

"Ah, but the papers are too valuable," he pleaded.

"And if they were so compromising," she continued, "if you thought they were so compromising, it never occurred to you that you could burn them?"

"But in that case," he rejoined, with an adroit plausibility, "you would never have known that I wished to do you a favour. No, I had to bring them personally—and at great expense. Then there is the further large expense of my being in London: it was long before I could find you, and become acquainted with your habits, so that I could communicate with you in safety. And therefore I recommend myself to your gracious consideration, before I can hand over the letters to you. I have done my best—and at large expense; and I have no wish you should suffer any exposure—any humiliation——"

Some sudden revolt of feeling got possession of her: she sprang to her feet, her splendid eyes flashing.

"*Ai da!*—enough of this!" she exclaimed. "I know you, Andreas Argyriades. I know you for a liar and a thief. I know that you robbed your mother and sister of every coin they could earn or borrow for you. And now you come to threaten me, because you think I am alone and unprotected. Well, I may be alone and unprotected, but I am not a coward—believe me, I am

not a coward. I tell you to do what you like with those letters! Make whatever mischief you can with them; but you shall not have a lepta from me—not one single lepta———”

She paused, for she was all trembling, and the quick coming and going of her breath was like to choke her. The terrified lad in the Bath chair could only interfere with a few bewildered phrases.

“Briseis—what is this man saying to you?—is he insulting you?—why don’t you bring a policeman?—I wish—I could help you———”

But Argyriades had put his hand on her arm; and she failed to liberate herself from his grasp.

“Listen,” he said, with soft persuasion. “Listen to reason, my good friend. I have no wish to make any mischief—not I! But one must live; and these papers are of value; and if I were to show them now to someone—someone like the Lord Fragkis Gordon—ah, why do you look startled?—do you not understand that I have had to wait some time, some good long time, to find out your circumstances, so that I could approach you without danger of publicity? And the Lord Fragkis Gordon, he at least has plenty of money, and he might be a little curious to see such beautiful French writing. Come now, sit down, my dear friend Briseis. It is so much easier to be amiable. And it is a simple thing for you to regain possession of the package—so very

simple; and never a word heard of it any more; and no risk of anyone misunderstanding what you have written when once you have put the bundle of sheets into the coals——”

She resumed her seat; she had grown outwardly passive; her eyes were intently preoccupied.

“Do I understand you, then,” she said, presently, in a subdued voice—but of course her boy-cousin could not understand a word—“that you will not give me back those letters unless I pay you?”

“If you wish to put it that way,” he answered her, with another deprecating little gesture.

“How much do you want?”

A gleam of satisfaction, not wholly concealed, shot into the small black eyes.

“Ah, that is a point now. That is a point to be examined. If it were Demetri—if it were Demetri who had the management of this affair, he would probably say five hundred pounds——”

She answered him with a look—of impatient contempt. But all the same she had grown cowed and submissive, perhaps overmastered by her one desire to get these papers back forthwith and have done.

“I agree with you,” said he, though she had not uttered a word. “That is absurd. But you do not know Demetri; he is a man of iron; he flinches from nothing. With me it is different. I wish to treat you

honourably. If I were not in hard straits, do you think I would ask you for a single drachma? No, truly! But you are rich, and you have rich relatives; while I am poor; and one must look to one's self——”

“How much do you want?” she said, in the same hurried undertone.

“Fifty pounds,” he answered, slowly; and the small black eyes furtively watched her.

“I have no such sum!”

“Thirty?”

“Nor that!”

“Twenty?”

“Perhaps, if I wrote to Edinburgh, I might get as much——”

With an unexpected movement he threw up both hands, as if scattering away from him all this sordid business; and he laughed.

“Come, now, I am about to surprise you,” he said. “You give me bad names: in return I will show you what it is to be magnanimous. I will have no further bargaining. The letters shall be restored to you at once; and I leave it to you to send me subsequently what you please——only what you please——exactly what you please——in consideration of my expenses, and my care and trouble——”

“Yes, yes,” she said, eagerly. “Let me have them

back at once; and I will send you what I can, from time to time——”

“And meanwhile,” he said, with a propitiating air, “if I might beg a small loan——”

“I have nothing with me!”

“But at home—in your house,” he went on, insidiously. “Two pounds—three pounds—you see how my stay in London has impoverished me; and you can send it to me—I will give you my address.”

He took from his pocket a card that had the name of a street in Soho and a number scribbled on it in pencil. He handed it to her, and she quickly folded it up. Then he rose.

“Farewell for the present, my dear friend; and be just when you reflect on the little transaction of this morning. Be just and considerate. Remember how fortunate it is for you to have these papers returned to you without having been seen by a single eye. And in such a friendly manner. Ah, if it had been Demetri now, what a terrible position would have been yours. But as I tell you, Demetri has a heart of iron, of steel, of diamond. Adieu, then, and au revoir!”

He raised his hat, and was gone. But even when she was rid of his presence Briseis was far from being herself again; she was altogether perturbed and shaken; a prey to doubts and anxieties, and conflicting resolves.

“Briseis,” her boy-cousin said, with his large eyes full of a vague apprehension of evil, “what did that man want? What is it that has troubled you so? Did he insult you that you were so scornful of him? Of course I could make out nothing—only the name of Sir Francis Gordon—yes—these were the only words I could make out. But if this man has been frightening you, Sir Francis Gordon would—would—kill him!” The lad spoke in panting accents. And then his eyes filled with tears. “You see, Cousin Briseis, I am so useless—so helpless—if anyone wishes to harm you, what can I do? But Sir Francis Gordon—if you were to tell him that this man had threatened you—or insulted you—then you would have someone who could take your part—there would be no more threatening then, I think!——”

“Hush, hush, Adalbert,” she said. “You do not understand.” She rose from the bench, and glanced swiftly around to see if there had been any onlooker or eaves-dropper: no one was near. “Come, we must be going home now. And, Adalbert,” she added, with some earnestness of appeal, “I have confidence in you; I can trust you not to say a word as to what you saw or heard this morning—not a word to any living creature. Indeed, it is nothing; it will all pass away and be forgotten. Not a word, Adalbert, mind; it is a secret I can trust you with; and yet what a little secret!

Soon it will be all forgotten." And with that she replaced the books and newspapers in the familiar receptacle and presently they had started off on their way to Devonshire Place.

Luncheon on this morning was marked by a most unwonted phenomenon; the poor little widow had become quite merry and facetious—that is to say, when she was not occupied in conciliating fractious tempers, and trying generally to keep the Queen's peace. It was the strangest sight, and almost pathetic in its way—the worn face and the tired eyes betraying a sort of occult gaiety, while she even adventured upon a little joke or two, as the talk went on. They hardly knew what to make of this unusual flow of spirits; but Briseis was shortly to learn; for, as soon as the others had dispersed she was summoned to follow her aunt to her own room.

"My dear Briseis," said Aunt Clara—and for once the wearied eyes looked pleased and complacent, "I have good news this morning; the telegram came almost immediately you had left with Adalbert; and yet I could not tell them at luncheon, for a reason. But you have a wise head on young shoulders, dear Briseis; you will understand. Well, then, it has been settled that Miss Bingham's younger sister—she is only a year younger, after all—is coming to stay with us, and on considerably increased terms. I would say very considerably increased

—only—you need not talk about it to Olga or Brenda; for the poor darlings know so little of the world and its ways, they know so little of the value of money that they might form perfectly wild ideas about what their dress allowance should be. And I will not conceal from you, dear Briseis,” continued Aunt Clara, with the faintest colour suffusing her pale face, “that it is probable the Binghams may have been led to this decision by—by hearing of the little party that the Prince and Princess were so good as to honour; and how shall I ever be able to thank that dear Sir Francis for his kindness? Of course Ada wrote home and gave a full account; and although you or I might not be influenced by such considerations—for, after all, anyone connected with the Elliots of the Lea is not likely to make too much of rank and titles—still, you know, people in the country who send their girls to town are pleased to hear that they are moving in good circles, however small these circles may be. And now, Briseis, now I am coming to the point,” she proceeded, almost excitedly, yet taking care that her voice should not reach out to the staircase. “The younger girl, Carlotta Bingham, will be here in a week or ten days; and I have been wondering whether we could not get up a little dance—a quiet little Cinderella sort of thing—just about that time; and yet not with the appearance that it was given on her account. Indeed, that is why

I did not tell them at luncheon of this matter having been settled: we will arrange about the dance first, if it is practicable—what do you think?”

“I, Aunt Clara?” said Briseis.

“You are so helpful—you are so quick with your suggestions. And indeed it is no use giving such a thing at all, however inexpensive we may try to make it, however we may scrimp and save, unless we have a few people of distinction—a few somebodies. And I’m sure our dear Sir Francis will be able to bring his friend Mr. Heatherstone—his name is in all the papers just now, over that exhibition; but first and foremost we must have Lady Hammersley. And really she owes it to us, after what we did for her bazaar; with your kind assistance, dear Briseis; and if there is anyone who could persuade her ladyship to fix her own evening, I am convinced it is yourself, for I saw the marked way she made much of you the last time we went there. Now do you understand, Briseis—I want to have the dance decided on before telling the girls about Ada’s sister; and if you would only go now, and take a ’bus or the underground out to Notting Hill and call on Lady Hammersley——”

“Aunt Clara, it is only a little after two!” Briseis said.

“Precisely,” answered the intrepid little schemer, “and by the time you get there you will find her and

her daughter at home—between lunch and their afternoon drive. And if you put it in that informal way—asking her to choose her own evening—and saying pretty things—she won't refuse you—she can't refuse you—it's the very least she can do after what we did for her bazaar."

So Briseis (who was thinking of widely different things) had to undertake this delicate mission; but before setting forth she went to her own room and counted out her small store of available wealth. It amounted to a little over five pounds; and when she had bestowed it in her purse, she sat down and wrote the following note—"Dear Andreas, I am sending you £5. It is all I have at present. I hope you can post me the packet of letters to-night, so that I may receive them to-morrow morning.—Briseis." And then, when she had left the house, she walked on until she came to a post-office; and there she procured an order, value £5; and that she folded and placed in the note she had written. When the letter had been dropped into the box outside she resumed her journey with some slight feeling of relief. She could ill afford to lose the £5, which was the last remnant of her quarterly allowance; nevertheless she would free herself, once and for all, from these insufferable menaces.

Her interview with Lady Hammerley turned out to be wholly successful; the jolly, red-faced, good-humoured-

looking woman said she would be delighted to bring her daughter on such-and-such an evening; and forthwith Briseis hurried home with the important news. Then, and for some days thereafter, a profound if secret commotion prevailed throughout the house in Devonshire Place. A programme of dances had to be drawn out and confided to the stationer; a violinist and pianist were engaged—Mrs. Elliott declaring that she could not think of asking Briseis to play the whole evening, especially as she would be so useful in many other ways; cards of invitation were printed—"Mrs. Alexander Elliott . . . At Home . . . Dancing from 8 till 12"; and dear Sir Francis was overwhelmed with gratitude because he had undertaken to bring one or two dancing-men with him. As for the young ladies, it is to be feared that *Polyeucte*, *Minna von Barnhelm*, and *I Promessi Sposi*, with their respective dictionaries, received but perfunctory attention; while the masters, calling at the appointed hours, found their pupils incomprehensibly absent-minded. It was milliners rather than masters who were in request now.

Briseis did not sleep much on the night following her encounter with Andreas Argyriades. She was harassed by doubts as to the wisdom of her own conduct. Ought she not to have held by her first impulse, and defied him to do what mischief he might with those letters? Had she not declared to him that there was

nothing in them that could compromise her; why not, then, have absolutely declined any negotiation whatsoever? She knew what blackmail was; she knew how commonly it was practised in some countries—in France, for example, where the levying of *chantage* has come to be a recognised and generally a safe profession; the rascally character of Argyriades was as clear to her as daylight; and no doubt (she said to herself) she ought to have dared him to the end. But then this other way seemed so simple and easy. The payment of a few pounds—the letters back in her possession—and there could be no possibility of further trouble. Thus she lay through the long hours of the night, striving to reassure herself, torturing herself with misgivings, and craving for the coming of the new day and the postman's ring at the bell.

When the bell did ring she was standing by the door, which she instantly opened. There was no packet for her of any kind. But there was a letter; and that, retreating into the dusk of the hall, she proceeded to read. It was from Argyriades. He began by expressing devout contrition. In saying that the package he had discovered among his sister's effects was now in his possession, he had, he said, erred by anticipation. It had not yet arrived; but doubtless it would be forthcoming within the next few days; failing that, it might be assumed that it was being held back by his

brother Demetri, who would be expecting a small present. If she were impatient, and wished to have these documents without delay, would she send him another £5, to be forwarded to Demetri, who would no doubt respond?—

She hardly read the rest: she knew the man lied. And with eyes burning with wrath and scorn she went rapidly to her room, and wrote a note, telling him that he lied. She demanded to have the letters returned to her at once. She would give no further £5; she presumed he knew what punishment was reserved in this country for scoundrels attempting to obtain money by threats. She wrote the letter in French—so that *chanteur* and *chantage* occurred pretty frequently in it.

But no reply came. Then she wrote again, and again—with a like result. And at last she adopted a prouder attitude. She would bother herself no more with this hound of a creature, who had stolen from his dead sister's desk. He might do what he pleased with the letters. She would think no more of them. And she had enough to occupy her attention at the moment, with this whole household of girls coming running to her every now and again for advice and help. Nay, she herself was looking forward with more than interest to this joyous little festivity. She wondered at what hour Sir Francis Gordon would arrive. She would

like to give him the first dance. And she had decided that as the sole ornament of her black dress she would wear in her bodice a bunch of yellow roses: he had greatly admired some yellow roses, on one occasion, when they were passing a florist's window in Regent Street. And would he remember?

That proved to be a fateful evening—for one of the persons concerned, at least. Frank Gordon was somewhat late in arriving; as he handed over his coat and hat to the manservant, he could hear the hushed sound of the music overhead; already there were several couples hanging about the upper part of the staircase, either to avoid the infliction of a square dance, or to indulge in a little aimless prattle. And just as he was about to ascend and make his way through these loungers in order to present himself to his hostess, who else than Briseis should come out of the dining-room. She seemed in a hurry; it was by a sort of accident that she turned to see who this latest arrival might be; but the next instant she had stopped short, while the look of welcome and gladness and kindness that leapt to her glorious eyes was surely enough to have turned any young man's head. And in that bewildering moment he thought he had never seen her so beautiful. There was a sort of semi-dusk here at the foot of the stairway; and the dark figure with its bunch of yellow roses appeared all the more effective for it; but the

compelling attraction was the smile of her parted lips, with all that that meant of affection and good-will.

"You are late," she said. "I had intended to give you the very first dance—if you wished it——"

"Then let us go up now," he said, promptly, "and we will call the next dance the first dance——"

"Ah, no, no," she answered him, laughing. "I am too busy at present. Aunt Clara can't do everything——"

"And you are not going to give me a dance at all?" he said, reproachfully.

"Oh, yes—perhaps a little later on—when all the shy young ladies have been provided with partners. But very soon I shall have to ask you to take Lady Hammersley down to supper—she says she wants to know you—she has relatives somewhere in the Highlands." And with that she went lightly and quickly up the staircase, disappearing into the crowded and brilliantly-lit room; while he, somewhat discontentedly following, had to seek out Mrs. Elliott, to pay his respects in due form.

The strange thing was that until this very moment he had never even contemplated the possibility of his being permitted to dance with Briseis. If he had thought of the matter, he would have told himself that she must dance beautifully: her perfect figure, the gracefulness of all her movements, her sympathetic ear,

were all assurances of that; but somehow it had never occurred to him that on him might fall the entrancement of finding her hand on his shoulder, her head close to him, while the cadenced rise and fall of the music carried them away together into a dream-world of forgetfulness. He had come to this chance little party in a perfunctory sort of fashion. Mrs. Elliott had been kind to him; he considered that he ought to put in an appearance; and he was quite ready to pilot Miss Olga through the Lancers, or teach the livelier Miss Ada the latest evolution of the Highland Schottische. But that his fingers should be clasping Briseis's fingers—his arm partly round her lissome and yielding form—the yellow roses so near to him that he could perceive their fragrance: this wondrous happening seemed hardly to be in the nature of things. With all her sweetness, and charm, and frank generosity, he had always felt that there was something mysteriously unapproachable about her; she was not as other girls, with whom one could be easily familiar; when a goddess appears, smiling and benignant-eyed, prostration is the natural attitude. *Serva Briseis* she was not—to him; rather *Vrysaïs*—*Vrysaïs* the unknown queen whose dim memory still lingers about the Lesbian shores.

He was startled out of his reverie by Briseis herself. She came up to him in a brisk and bright and

friendly way, not in the least suggestive of forgotten queens and haunted towers overlooking the far Aegean seas.

"The next is a waltz," she said, glancing at her programme. "I promised it to Professor Drewer—a friend of Edward's; but he is not in the room—perhaps he has left——"

"Will you give it to me?" he said, rather breathlessly.

"I must wait a minute or two—two minutes at the outside—and then——"

The soft and melodious strains of the waltz began; Briseis was looking down the long room; and Gordon, with covert apprehension, had half turned towards the portière concealing the staircase, when there appeared (whence he had come it was hard to say) a tall, thin man of about thirty with a pale face clean-shaven save for short black whiskers.

"This is ours, I think," he said politely to Briseis; and she—well, perhaps there was the least deprecatory raising of her eyebrows as she parted from Frank Gordon—she had to receive the newcomer with a little smile of greeting. She put her hand on his arm; he led her through the nebulous crowd; and presently they had gained the central open space where several couples were already moving swiftly and rhythmically

to the undulating pulsations of the music. And then these two also glided away.

And now it was that Frank Gordon's punishment began—a punishment for long afternoons and days and weeks of happy, careless, thoughtless self-indulgence—a punishment the sternness and magnitude of which were not yet to be imagined. For of course it was no mere pang of mortification over Briseis having been carried off from him; the loss of a dance was a common ball-room incident; he bore the man no ill-will whatever. But as he stood there looking on, watching with hungry eyes that ever-reappearing figure—so slender, so graceful, so bewitching in its allurements and sinuous motion, there was a cruel pain at his heart. And why? Any of the other girls might go whirling past with looped-up skirt and clinging hands and arms; they were welcome; he had not a thought for them. But the black figure with the yellow roses: why did the ever-recurring glimpses of her cause a dull, indefinable aching, a deadened and hopeless sense of the unattainable, while the vibrating tones of the violin spoke of nothing but sadness, and renunciation, and wild farewell? As yet, standing there, he had no real conception of the tragic circumstances in which he had become involved; but at least he knew that this vague suffering, this dark and unreasoning jealousy, this blankness of despair, were strange and unforeseen things, that might have

consequences he dared not contemplate. And in the meantime? Well, he was near the door; and in a blind kind of way he pushed aside the curtains and got out upon the landing at the top of the staircase, whither some straggling folk had wandered to breathe the cooler air. His main intent was to find some plausible excuse he could leave for Briseis and Mrs. Elliott, and then to seek the seclusion of his own rooms, to discover for himself what he had now to face.

It was at this moment that he was seized upon by his hostess, who introduced him to Lady Hammersley, and asked him to take her down to supper. The roseate dame with the banked-up white hair was a talkative companion; when, in the room below, he had got a couple of chairs, and procured some refreshment for her, she proceeded to entertain him with a voluble discourse on many and diverse matters—her mission to draymen, her love of horses, her abhorrence of divided skirts, and her desire to visit Scotland.

“And you, Sir Francis,” she said. “I suppose you will soon be returning to Dee-side?”

He seemed to wake up as if out of a dream.

“I?” he said. “Oh, no—no. I think—I think I must take a little voyage across the Atlantic, first of all.”

CHAPTER IV.

"NOW ALL IS DONE."

"BRISEIS," said her boy-cousin, here in Regent's Park, "did you see anyone as we were leaving the Inner Circle?"

"No one in particular," she answered him, carelessly. "Why?"

"I suppose I must have been mistaken," he said—and with that she resumed her turning over the leaves of his MS. book, to choose some piece for recitation.

But nevertheless he remained restless and dissatisfied; he kept glancing down the dim blue vistas between the trunks of chestnut and sycamore; indeed he was so preoccupied that at first he did not notice what this was that she had begun to read. And then of a sudden he became conscious.

"Don't!" he said, quickly, his face burning red with confusion. "Don't read that, Briseis! I did not know it was there. I'm awfully sorry. I beg your pardon. I forgot it was there, or I would have torn out the leaves. I beg your pardon——"

"But what harm is there in Lord Byron's 'Isles of Greece'?" said she, wondering.

"It is a reproach against your country—a long reproach from beginning to end—and—and I don't want you to imagine—that any English person would think anything like that—or say anything like that to you——"

"Indeed," said she, smiling, to this sensitive small gentleman, "it is no reproach at all, but an exhortation; and it may have had its effect, you know, Adalbert. Anyhow, Greece has won her independence; and she ought to be the last to resent anything Byron ever wrote about her——"

"Give me the book, Briseis," he said, and she handed it to him; "I will look out for something else."

But even now he did not turn at once to the MS. pages.

"Cousin Bry," he said, "you remember the man who spoke to you one morning last week?"

"Oh, yes," she made answer, lightly enough.

"Is it to avoid him that we have taken to coming here?"

For the truth was they had forsaken their familiar retreat, where aforetime they had been half surrounded by bushes; and they had sought out another secluded spot, also overlooking the lake. At this present moment, they were seated in a sort of open enclosure; above their heads the spreading branches of an elm; in front of them a breadth of greensward sloping down to the margin of the water; then the wide space of

calm surface; and beyond that, on the other side, a row of tall trees that did not stir a leaf on this windless morning. Under that bank of foliage the oily, olive-green shadows were still and dreamlike—until a swan came breasting along, cleaving the liquid mirror, and leaving behind it two flashing divergent lines of silver. Placid and silent was this haven of rest, though there was a distant rumble of omnibuses, and though a faint film of smoke telling of the great city rose into the mingled white and azure of a cirrus sky. These surroundings of theirs were no doubt common enough; and yet there was a certain sense of remoteness; even the hushed roar of the omnibuses had at times a suggestion of the sea.

When Briseis was asked whether she had chosen this isolated refuge in order to escape from Andreas Argyriades, she laughed—a little uneasily.

"Why, what do you take me for, Adalbert?" she said. "Do I look as if I were afraid of him? Have you seen me watching for him—and hiding? But then, you know, there are sometimes horrid things to be met with, like blackbeetles, and mice, and earwigs; and although one isn't actually afraid of them, one would rather keep out of their way——"

"For if it was the same man," her cousin continued, "that I saw as we were leaving the Inner Circle, he appeared to be following us——"

“So much the better—so much the better!” she responded, with blithe assurance. “We shall get our interview over all the sooner. And you understand, Adalbert, that we must be back in good time this morning: Sir Francis is coming to lunch, to take some of us to the theatre—*The Mother-in-law*—very amusing they say it is; and it is a great chance, for there is such a run on the piece; but he said some time ago that he would look out. Adalbert, did you ever know anyone quite so kind, and thoughtful, and generous as he is?” Her manner had completely changed, and her expression too; her beautiful, great, dark eyes were full of a happy light; there was a soft and lingering music in the low tones of her voice whenever she chanced to speak (which was pretty often) of Frank Gordon. “And then he is so modest!” she went on. “Why, if I were he, I should be so proud—oh! so proud as to be unendurable—I should want everybody to know, not merely that I was Sir Francis Gordon, but that I was Gordon of Grantly. And I should expect everyone to know the history of the clan, and all the battles and fights of the old time. Why, when I was at Grantly Castle, he seemed to make light of everything—the family portraits—the weapons in the hall—the ancient building itself; he seemed afraid to be thought a *poseur*; he seemed to laugh everything aside, and to consider his visitors as all-important. But there,” she said, with a

sudden peevishness, "what is the use of my talking? I know what your opinion is: I know you detest him!"

"Oh, yes, of course I do," said her cousin. "Only—only I wonder where else you would find a grown-up man like that—one in his position—taking notice of a lame boy like me."

"There now—that's what it is!" she broke in, eagerly. "That's just where it is! He is generously disposed all round; there is no time-serving and respecting of persons; look at the trouble he must have been at to get you the Highland dirk, and the broadsword, and the targe——"

"Of course, Briseis," her boy-cousin said, "everyone understands why he is particularly kind to anyone in our house—why he comes to the house at all. Everyone knows: it is to see you."

But at this she drew in a little; and there was a touch of colour on her forehead as she replied—

"You must not say such things, Adalbert. They might be very much misunderstood."

Some short time thereafter, happening to raise her eyes from the MS. book, she saw that Andreas Argyriades was approaching by one of the paths: even at a certain distance she knew who this was by the green-white waxen pallor of his face and the furtive and watchful look of his small black eyes, to say nothing of his jaunty costume, now supplemented by a cane and

a pair of yellow kid gloves. She betrayed no surprise—took no notice, indeed. She resumed her reading, if in lower tones—

“Strike! and drive the trembling rebels
Backwards o’er the stormy Forth;
Let them tell their pale Convention
How they fared within the North.
Let them tell that Highland honour
Is not to be bought nor sold——”

“I beg your pardon for interrupting you, my dear friend,” Argyriades said, in Romaic, and with a ceremonious bow he took off his straw hat.

She looked up; the recognition she accorded him was of the slightest; but he on his part deliberately went to the foot of an adjacent tree, got hold of one of the small green-painted chairs standing there, and brought it back with him, seating himself beside her.

“Now, my dear friend Briseis——”

“I do not wish to hear anything you may have to say,” she interposed, calmly and coldly.

“Again I beg your pardon,” he said, with studied politeness, “but it is necessary you should. It is of great importance to you—greater than you imagine. I did not answer the hasty notes you sent me; no, for it is always unwise, it is useless, to reply to what is written in anger. To consider the situation quietly is the better way——”

"I do not wish to consider any situation," she retorted, with some greater warmth. "You know well how the case stands between us. You stole from your dead sister's writing-desk certain letters belonging to me. You offered to hand them over to me if I paid you; and foolishly I sent you the money you demanded. Then you lied; you refused to return them, hoping for more money; and now you come here, again hoping for more money. But, sir, you have made a mistake. I tell you, you may do what you like with those letters. Show them to whom you like! They are perfectly harmless, as you are aware——"

"Perhaps—perhaps," he replied, with absolute equanimity. "Perhaps I might think so; perhaps another might not think so; it matters nothing. But in my present hard straits, if I cannot come to you now and again and ask you for a little friendly help—if I am forced, greatly against my will, to come to you in a different manner—I do not propose to avail myself of that packet of letters at all. Oh, no. I may myself burn them; they are of little use to me; though I had hoped they might be the means of inducing you to give a little aid to an acquaintance of former times and a fellow-countryman. It was not to be so. Very well. But I have other resources. Indeed I may say that I have means whereby I can very easily secure your consent to any arrangement I choose to propose——"

“Ti thauma!” she exclaimed, scornfully; but she was startled all the same; his manner was so tranquil and confident.

“Oh, yes, truly,” he continued, crossing his gloved hands the one over the other, the cane being between. “Do you know why I did not answer the hurried and angry notes you sent to me? Because I wished to have more of them—indignant, demanding, imperative, so much the better. But on reflection I have enough. And it is with these, not with the others, that I propose to secure your kindness, my dear friend. I can dispense with the passionate adorations of our good Lamprinos; I can even burn them. But what have I in their stead? My dear friend, you do not appear to perceive the situation in which you have placed yourself. Supposing that I take only the first of these notes to anyone particularly interested in you, and I say, ‘Sir, behold here is a communication to me from the beautiful Miss Valieri; and you will see that she pays a first instalment of £5 to procure back to herself certain letters: it is for you to judge whether these letters were likely to have been compromising or not’? My dear friend, you say I can work no harm. Is not that a little harm? Is not that a revenge, a just revenge, in the case of your being implacable and refusing me assistance in my hard straits?——”

Her look had changed. She saw how she had been

entrapped; and for a moment or two she was fear-stricken and palpitating.

"But the truth is stronger!" she said, breathlessly. "Even if you tried such a base and wicked thing, the truth would defeat you! For anyone would immediately answer you, 'Produce, then, the compromising letters'——"

"And if these were destroyed?—or missing somewhere in Greece?" he said, placidly. "If there remained only this plain and evident testimony that you were so anxious to get them back that you paid a first instalment of money——"

At this moment there chanced to come along one of the workmen of the Park, carrying some garden implement in his hand. As soon as he was near enough, Adalbert Elliott, who had been watching his cousin's face with the intensest scrutiny, and who was almost voiceless, indeed, with excitement and indignation—Adalbert managed to call aloud from the Bath chair—

"Gardener—gardener—come here for a moment! Or will you go for a policeman?—will you send a policeman here?—there is a lady being terrified by this rascal——"

The British workman does not like meddling in matters which he does not understand. The official in mole-skin stood staring with bovine eyes at the members of this little group, looking from one to the other, say-

ing nothing, asking nothing. But Briseis herself addressed him hurriedly—

“No, no, it is all a mistake. Never mind; it is nothing. We were merely talking. This gentleman is my friend.”—‘God, what a friend!’ she said to herself, as the gardener went leisurely on his way.

“What does your young companion wish?” asked Argyriades, calmly, with a glance at the lad’s flushed cheeks and panting breast.

“He wishes a policeman to be sent for,” was her instant retort.

“What, for me?” he said, elevating his eyebrows slightly. “Ah, that would be so impolitic. You surely do not court exposure, my dear friend? If there is any exposure, if there is any lamentable result, then it is owing to you, not to me. Besides, what am I doing that is against English law? Here I am sitting quietly, advising an old acquaintance as to what is best in her own interests. Not a single threat even—everything amicable. Now if it were Demetri that you had to deal with, ah, what a position would be yours! Demetri recognises that in the implacable fight for life it is everyone for himself; and he is merciless, relentless—relentless, merciless. Whereas I come to you and show you what danger you are in; I wish to be your friend; I wish to help you——”

“Then give me back every one of those notes I

sent you!" she said, imperatively. "Keep the letters! And keep the money! Or if it is money you want——" She hesitated. "Yes—to have done with you I will give you ten pounds—I will give you twenty pounds—for everything—everything—everything!" Then again she said: "No, I will not!—not a farthing! Oh, I don't know what to do!" she exclaimed, almost wildly. "But this I do know, that if your brother Demetri is a meaner, a more contemptible scoundrel than you, then I am ashamed that my country should have given birth to such a pair!"

She rose to her feet, as if by some physical effort she would throw off the coils she felt inevitably gathering round her. And Adalbert, who had been looking on in the greatest distress, struck in—

"Briseis, is it not about time we were getting back home? If Sir Francis Gordon is coming to lunch, we must not be late, you know——"

"Yes, yes, yes," she said, quickly, and she placed the MS. volume in the leather pocket.

"And may not I accompany you for part of the way?" Argyriades said, blandly. "There are so many things I wish to make clear to you while I have the opportunity. It is not always safe to write, in delicate negotiations——"

"Then you are afraid of the magistrate, after all?" she said.

“Ah, no, no, not in the least,” he responded, as he set out walking by her side. “For what am I doing? In a language that no one around understands I am offering you a little advice—nothing more. I show you how you are situated; and I ask you not to push me to extremities. I am not revengeful; though you have refused help to a countryman, and called him many hard names. These I do not heed; these do not hurt. No, I give you my word of honour, I am not revengeful; and I do not propose to show anyone your written entreaties to me, if you will be considerate, if you will give me a few pounds from time to time, until you can give me the large sum that is to redeem what you call everything—everything—everything. I am not merciless, like Demetri; I am reasonable; but above all I am poor, and in hard straits—while you are rich.”

“I am not rich!” she answered him—but with some despairing consciousness that answering was of no avail. “My small fortune was lost, altogether lost; and the little I have to live on now——”

“Ah, I know,” he said. “I know something of that. But you have rich relatives, and rich friends, and, still more, you have rich expectations: do I not understand something of that too? Reflect, then. Might it not be worth your while to consent to some arrangement—

some equitable arrangement—which would benefit me and harm none other——"

"I have no money—I gave you all I had!" she said desperately.

"Ah, but how easy for you to obtain it! There are always guardians, trustees, relatives who can be appealed to; they advance assistance, because of the rich expectations—how easy all that is!"

And so he went on explaining her position to her, and defending his own conduct, with an insinuating and subtle ingenuity; while her revolted judgment had hardly a word in reply—or perhaps she did not deign to reply. In this manner they left the Park, and crossed over, and got into Devonshire Place; and still he hung on to her, with his crafty plausibilities carefully avoiding any distinct introduction of a threat. But just as they were nearing the house, Adalbert called out—

"Briseis, there is Sir Francis!—won't you wait for him?"

Her eyes lighted up with pleasure and welcome — perhaps with some assurance of safety too. As for Argyriades, he also seemed to recognise the new-comer.

"You will let me hear from you?" he said to Briseis, in an undertone. "Adieu!" And therewith he raised his hat, turned away, and made off in the direction of the Marylebone Road.

During the next second or two something strange and bewildering occurred. She was standing there, ready to put into words the more than friendly greeting that already shone in her face, and having no further thought at all of the baneful influence from which she had just been freed. As Frank Gordon came along she could see that his look was following the figure of the man who had so suddenly slunk away at his approach. That was but natural. He may even have been surprised; people do not usually beat so hasty a retreat; it was enough to court observation. But what she was not prepared for—she who had studied, who knew, his every shade of expression—was the grave and reserved fashion in which Gordon, who ordinarily was so light-hearted and off-handed, received and returned her welcome. Was he in trouble, then? It could not be that in an instant he had grown suspicious of her! Only—and all this happened with incredible swiftness—as he helped her as usual to get Adalbert and the empty Bath chair into the house, her heart sank somehow. With a strange and vague alarm she felt that he and she were not as they had been. And she did not know what wrong she had done.

Nor was it with much lightness of spirit that he now ascended to the drawing-room, leaving Briseis and her boy-cousin below. He knew that this must be his last visit—or at least one of the last—to a house

whither he had been drawn by an unsuspected but all too powerful attraction. It is true he might have made some excuse and escaped from this theatre-engagement also, thereby enabling him to sever the connection at once and finally; but he did not wish to do anything that would provoke remark. He would rather withdraw gradually. And he would take scrupulous care to show, on the one or two occasions on which he might still have to meet Briseis that his attitude towards her differed in nothing from his attitude towards the others. He could keep his own secret—and dree his own weird.

But in those hours of anxious self-examination that had followed his startling discovery, during which he was asking himself whether he had unwittingly been guilty of exhibiting any special favour towards Briseis, there was one point that pricked him hard. In making up the successive small parties for concerts or picture-galleries or theatres, while Mrs. Elliott's convenience, or the size of the box, or some such consideration might rule out this one or that of the other girls, Briseis was always included. It had come to be a general understanding. It was "Briseis—and who else with her?" And now, at the last moment, here came an opportunity of showing that he had never meant to treat Briseis differently from the rest. The box he had secured at the theatre was for four: if she—by some arrangement

sently, "but the only box I could get for to-day holds only four. Now I don't think it was quite settled—perhaps you could tell me who are going to be so kind as to make up the party——"

"Really, Sir Francis," said the widow—and her tired and troubled face looked quite sympathetic and pleased as she regarded the young man—"they are all so much indebted to you; but this time I do think my dearest Olga and Brenda were mentioned—I wouldn't dictate—it is for you to say——"

"Oh, but that's all right," said he. "That's all right." And then at this point he hesitated, and very nearly broke away from his resolve. He felt as if he were about to strike Briseis—and that she would quiver under the blow. However, he went on. "There is the fourth place, Mrs. Elliott—?"

She looked at him with some astonishment.

"Oh, yes—of course—I had assumed you would be taking Briseis——"

"But haven't we been rather neglectful of Miss Cinderella?" he suggested. "There shouldn't be a Cinderella in any house—it isn't fair——"

Carlotta Bingham, who was known by this nickname, and who was the youngest and latest addition to the household, coloured up when she heard herself mentioned in this connection: she had not hitherto participated in any of these little festivities.

“Oh, our dear Carlotta?” exclaimed the widow, with instant approval. “That would be so nice! That would be so kind of you, Sir Francis. I’m sure you will be such a happy party. They tell me that *The Mother-in-law* is just too laughable for anything.” And so that matter was settled; and as the gong now sounded they all of them trooped down to the dining-room, where Briseis had just established her cousin Adalbert at the luncheon-table.

To Frank Gordon this was a sombre meal: it seemed to be in consonance with the mysterious darkening of the day all around them, caused by the creeping up of the thunder-clouds that now hung overhead. There was plenty of chattering at the table, it is true; but to him it sounded as if it came from a distance. He instinctively knew that at times Briseis’s eyes sought his face, questioning; and he did not dare to meet any of those timid glances. He rather tried to listen to the trash that the anæmic medical student was talking: it appeared to be some kind of cheap cynicism—perhaps sufficient to overawe a company of girls.

“What does a man do when he’s drunk? Why, he don’t know! If he’s got a stiff dose of rum into him, he’ll turn his hand to anything. He’ll quarrel with a policeman, and knock off his helmet; and that means a five-shilling fine the next morning. Or he’ll run out from an earthwork and under heavy fire he’ll pick up a

wounded comrade, and carry him back into safety; and that means that next day his colonel tells him he's going to recommend him for the Victoria Cross. It's all a toss-up—whether it's to be a five-shilling fine or the V.C.; and when he gets sober again he finds out what has happened!”

The fond mother looked admiringly at the pallid youth; and with unmistakable pride she turned to her neighbour.

“Well, Sir Francis, what do you say to that?” she asked, with a smile.

“There's a good deal of scepticism going about nowadays,” he answered her, with careless irrelevance. “Very soon they'll be saying that Balbus never did build any wall.”

In fact he was paying but little heed to all this aimless strife of tongues; he was thinking rather of the moment when Briseis should discover that she was to be left behind, and he was wondering how she would take the unexpected change. As it turned out, some chance remark of one of the girls, as they rose from table, revealed the truth; but he resolutely kept his eyes away from Briseis's face. Probably, he said to himself, she would show no sign at all; she was not a school-girl; and if there was any little surprise or disappointment, the general sunniness of her nature would soon throw all that aside. When a little while there-

after, they parted at the front door—for she had come to see the theatre-goers off—she shook hands with him and bade good-bye to him just as usual; and if she regarded him with something of grave inquiry—perhaps of proud and injured and pathetic inquiry—it was mayhap as well that he did not notice. He was glad to get away and bury himself in this four-wheeled cab.

It might have been a hearse, as far as he was concerned; and black as his thoughts were the louring heavens overhead, that looked all the more heavy and ominous because of the steely half-light shining along the house fronts. Fortunately the girls kept jabbering among themselves; and he was left alone in peace. What he was mostly thinking of was this—— Had the last farewell been taken?—and in that manner?

The four of them got into the box just as the play began. It was one of those farcical comedies the hero of which courts the laughter of the audience by exhibiting himself as a helpless imbecile in all sorts of impossible situations; and in this case he was neither better nor worse than his kind; the house, from stalls to gallery, roared at the poor man's perplexities and fatuities—even though at times there was a sort of startled hush as the distant thunder growled. But what Frank Gordon saw was the strangest thing: a phantasmagoria with no laughter in it at all—with no meaning even: a series of scenes without connection: an ap-

pearance of figures that had apparently no relation to each other. A fat, elderly gentleman was vociferously irate about something; two young women, with tragic gestures, wept hysterically; the distracted tomfool tumbled in on the stage with his coat half torn off his back; there was a wild conference of relatives, all of them in evening dress and all of them undoubtedly insane: in short, the fun grew fast and furious, and the audience kept up a continuous chorus of laughter, in spite of that low, muttering growl above the roof. And then, once and again, there was a sudden light in the upper parts of the theatre—a pale and livid flash that made the other lights look orange; then a space of silence followed by an alarming rattle that seemed to shake the gewgaw building and all its canvas simulacra; and after that a fierce hissing of rain that sounded as if it were descending in sheets. It was the oddest kind of accompaniment to this tangled web of nothingness that was being produced on the stage; perhaps it was some consciousness of this overweighing war of the elements that distracted his attention; at all events these figures were to him as figures in a dream; and when at length he had to see about getting his companions safely taken home, he had not the faintest intelligible idea as to what had been passing before him. He had been present at the performance of a mystery.

When they arrived at the house, the girls would have had him go in with them, for tea; but he declined; he resumed possession of the cab, and was driven down to the Sirloin Club, which snug little place he found he had all to himself. So he drew in an easy-chair to the fire; and called for a reading-lamp to be placed on the small table; and took from his pocket a number of letters that he had merely skimmed over in the morning. There was one from the Princess, who had remarkably little to say about her future daughter-in-law, and a great deal to say, of a comical kind, concerning the worldly-pious waverings of the Margravine of Pless-Gmunden. There was one from Lord Rockminster, containing an invitation for the first fortnight in December. There was another from Lady Adela, informing him that she was about to send him her new novel, and he was 'honestly — *honestly*, now,' to tell her what he thought of it, and how many of the people he could recognise. If he knew of any free libraries, in the north or elsewhere, that would accept a copy, she would be delighted to send one; and would it be considered a greater compliment if she added her autograph? But of course the all-engrossing communication was that from Georgie Lestrangle — one of the first she had written after her arrival at her new abode; and these pages he pored over, and read again and again, as if

he were striving to learn something about the writer—something more than was possible to be learnt during their lad-and-lass skirmishing among the hills and moors and river-valleys of Inverness-shire. Curiously enough, it was to these wild neighbourhoods that (as soon as she had said what she had to say about her brother's condition) the longings of her soul seemed to return. Already Miss Georgie was grown nostalgic. The sky of Florida, she declared, was too palely and uniformly blue, and it was too far removed away from the earth. She wanted clouds that came into the picture—that were part of her surroundings—that lent light and shadow to the dappled straths, that gave splendours of colour to the sunsets, and brought majesty into the moonlight nights. All of which considerations naturally led up to reminiscences, of a more or less pathetic cast.

"Do you remember," wrote this ingenuous student of art and landscape, "one morning you were fishing the Priest's Bridge Pool; and I was reading a book; and when I began to read I thought the skies were perfectly fine and flawless. Then in a little while I happened to look up, to see what you were doing; and lo and behold! there had stolen into the sky, staring over the crest of the opposite hill, a great mass of white cloud, not shaded with any perspective, but a bolt-upright mass, a blinding white against a blinding blue, and

glaring at you as if it had come jumping out of another world. And then such keenness of colour; the purple slopes of heather, far off as they were, had come quite *near*—you would have thought you could touch them with your parasol. Which was all very remarkable and admirable; but in five minutes the heavens were *black*, and the rain was whipping the Priest's Bridge Pool into smoke, and I was hiding my wee self under an alder-bush . . . Was that the day we startled the heron down by the Silver Pool, on our way home? Oh, the gorgeousness of that evening!—the hills out in the west like violet velvet against the gold; and all the tops of Aonach Môr burning in crimson; and down in the still pools, beside the green alders, the crimson repeated again on the smooth water. And there was that gray phantom of a creature; and we crept up behind the bushes; and he was out on a stone; and I think you could have touched him with the point of your rod, before he stretched out his great wings and went away down the river as silently as a moth . . . But best of all were the moonlight evenings—you remember?—when we went a little way up into the open forest, and listened for the belling of the stags, and there was a golden moon just over Ben-na-Vân, and a mist all along the moorland, and Lady Adela, and Rose, and Sibyl—the White Sisters—like three ghosts, and not a single

word said because of the stillness. And once we heard the pipes—oh! so far away—a faint, *unearthly* cry—I never heard the like of it before—it was the banshee! Do you remember the magical nights with the moonlight coming through the trees on to the lawn, and the scent of sweet-gale, and the murmur of the stream down in the valley?—do you remember?—*do you care to remember?*—are you as anxious as I am to remember and recall? Well, well, it's no use. Only, I'm sick of blue skies—skies that are monotonously and uninterestingly blue; and my heart flies away back to a country that I know—a country where there are clouds, and wild seas, and rain, and silver, and glorious sunsets, and mystic nights among the hills.

*Dahin, dahin,
Möcht' ich mit dir, O mein Geliebter, ziehn!"*

Why, this was quite a burst of eloquence on the part of Georgie; and for the moment he, too, experienced an upraising of heart in recalling their boy-and-girl escapades. Surely it was none so tragic a fate to which his honour had bound him; that happy-go-lucky companionship in the northern wilds would lead naturally enough into the more serious, the life-long, companionship that lay before him. And all would be well.

But there was something haunting him, even amidst

these optimistic resolves and hopes: it was the recollection of a house in Devonshire Place—the front door open—and a last look from which he had turned away his eyes.

CHAPTER V.

A RESOLVE.

Now hardly had Frank Gordon and the three girls driven away to the theatre when the indefatigable little widow, seeking to console those who had been left behind, proposed that she and they should pay a visit to the Brewers' Exhibition at the Agricultural Hall. Perhaps, strictly speaking, this could scarcely be called introducing the young ladies to polite society—at least, to any great extent; but the entertainment was cheap; much information might be acquired; and there was a Highland piper playing outside one of the distillery stalls. And so, despite the threatening weather, a cab was sent for; and Miss Ada, and Miss Bowles, and Miss Tressider were bidden to get ready.

"I'm very sorry we can't take you as well, dear Briseis," said the widow. "The cab only holds four, of course. And besides I know you are anxious to get on with those dining-room curtains; for I wouldn't let anyone else touch them; they might spoil your design; and it was so clever of you to think of a stem of maize and the simple leaves; the gold thread on the dark

green cloth is so effective; and such free, bold drawing—where did you learn to do all these clever things?—or is it just a natural gift all round? I'm so sorry we can't take you——”

“Oh, but I would much rather get on with the curtains, Aunt Clara,” said Briseis. She had looked dazed and scared all during luncheon—perhaps no one had noticed; and now she seemed chiefly anxious to get away and be alone. But she remained in the hall, to help the girls on with their jackets and capes.

The cab came up; the bustling, loquacious party got out upon the pavement—with many exclamations about the thunderous look of the skies; then they drove off; and the house again grew still. Briseis went into the school-room. Her cousin Adalbert was lying on the sofa, absorbed in reading football news; but as soon as he saw her, he threw aside the paper.

“Briseis,” said he at once, “have you and Sir Francis Gordon quarrelled?”

She hesitated. What was the use of a boy confidant? And yet she was sorely distraught; her mind was all tempest-torn with fears and conjectures; to speak to anyone was an immeasurable relief. And the lame lad had always been her chivalrous friend and champion.

“What makes you think that?” she asked, evasively.

“He never left you at home before, when others were going.”

“Oh, that is nothing—that is nothing,” she answered him. “Someone must remain behind—why not I? I have had more than my share of those concerts and theatres. He has been very kind to me—very——”

“He hardly spoke a word to you at luncheon,” her cousin continued.

“There was so much talking!” she said.

“Well, then, when he first saw you—I mean outside—when he came along the pavement—and the other man was going away——”

Her expression instantly changed.

“Ah, did you notice that, Adalbert?—did you notice that? Was it so obvious that anyone could notice it? Indeed I knew I could not be mistaken! And what had I done? Why should he be angry with me? Yes, I saw him look in that curious way after Argyriades; but why should he blame me if anyone speaks to me? Why should he have changed so suddenly—why should he regard me with coldness and distrust? And yet I cannot believe that he could suspect me—that he could be so unjust as to accuse me merely because he saw a stranger going away! No, no; there must be something else,” she went on, with growing excitement. “Adalbert, what is it that I have done? What wrong can I have done? Why did he not tell me if I was to blame?”

She was standing by the table, her fingers tightly clasped in front of her; her lips were trembling, and

her eyes had filled with tears. It was a strange thing for the helpless lame boy to witness. Ordinarily the demeanour of this beautiful, tall cousin of his was marked by a perfect self-possession—a self-possession sweet and serene and well-wishing: now she was like some frightened child, who had been reprimanded or punished for an unknown offence. Yet how could the poor lad help her? He had no wit or skill in such matters. Indeed, of late, when Briseis seemed to be in trouble, it had always occurred to him that it was to Frank Gordon himself she ought to appeal.

“Briseis,” he said, almost at random, “what does that man want who has come twice to threaten you? I cannot understand a word of what he says; but I know he threatens you—you are so scornful and indignant——”

“Ah, that is quite another thing,” she answered him, quickly. “That is a question of money; that is a trifle; I am not so concerned about that, except at the moment. It is not of threatening or of money that one thinks when—— And yet—and yet,” she went on, after a second or so, “there are such strange possibilities. If Argyriades has already tried to make mischief—who can tell? It is all a bewilderment to me—and I have no one to guide me—no one at all. And if there was any chance of mischief, don’t you think it would be better to sacrifice anything—anything—to get rid of

that man? Don't you think so, Adalbert? If it is only a question of money, what is money?—what is any sacrifice to get rid of such a threat? I have no money—none at all at present; but perhaps my trustee in Edinburgh could get some for me. Don't you think I ought to buy this man off at any cost, to make sure—to make sure?—don't you think so, Adalbert?—don't you think so?"

In her agitation she was really talking to herself; she did not wait for any reply; and her cousin, embarrassed and conscious that he was incapable of advising her, dared not speak. But she seemed to have made up her mind. She cleared a portion of the table. She fetched some writing-materials from the top of a chest of drawers. And then she sat down and hastily wrote two notes: the first of them, addressed to Mr. Murray, the Edinburgh W. S., begged him to advance her five-and-twenty pounds, if that was within the scope of his powers; the second conveyed a curt intimation to Argyriades that she would meet him at a quarter to twelve on the following morning, at the corner of York Terrace and York Gate, while she added that she hoped he would come prepared to state explicitly what sum he would take in return for all communications from her in his possession, including the one she was now penning. These two letters, for safety's sake, she herself carried to the nearest post-office box; thereafter

returning to the tranquil embroidery of golden stems and joints and leaves on the breadth of dark green cloth. Her boy-cousin, furtively regarding her from time to time, guessed that her mind might not be quite as tranquil as her occupation; but he was too diffident to interfere, even with a shy word of sympathy.

The day wore on, and she grew more and more sick at heart, because of all this doubt, and questioning, and anxious surmise. Frank Gordon's change of manner towards her had been so sudden, so unexpected, so inexplicable. "Why — why?" she kept asking herself. Surely he could not suspect or scorn her simply because a stranger in the street had slunk away at his approach? Or had Argyriades been attempting to find a better market for his stolen wares? Perhaps a sample had been shown? And she was to be condemned unheard—by the one human being on whose opinion and regard she had come to set such perilous store.

And then she drew a cloak of pride around her. Why should she be solicitous about any man's esteem? It was for her to award favour, if she should so choose; that was her prerogative; they who valued her approval, even to the extent of a good word or a friendly look, would have to come for it. The old ballads had told her what the Gordons were—gay, gallant, and fickle; 'he turned about lightly, as the Gordons does a';' and this one, the most careless-hearted of all the race of

them, if he had suddenly resolved to become grave and serious and distant, was welcome so to do. Nay, if he believed her capable of this or that folly or infamy, it was not for her to defend herself. The world was wide enough for them both; and she was no Lady Jean Melville, to take to her bed, and lie there pale and wan, because another of the gay Gordons had turned on his heel.

That night was wet; the rain kept softly pattering on the window of her solitary little room, up in the attic; when she looked out, and down, she could see the lamps throwing reflections of quivering gold on the streaming black pavements. She had been crying a little, from time to time. For her cloak of pride had brought her but small comfort, and had long ago been discarded; an anguish of dull foreboding held possession of her; sleep was out of the question; she was all unstrung; and she was abjectly penitent—for she knew not what. Now and again she went to her mirror; perhaps with some pathetic desire to convince herself of the splendour of her youthful beauty; perhaps merely out of dread that this unresting grief might leave traces that she would find it difficult to explain on the morrow. At last, hardly conscious of what she was doing, she opened her writing-desk, and turned up the gas a little, and sought for and brought forth a sheet of MS. scrawled and dotted over.

On more than one occasion Frank Gordon had ex-

pressed himself as greatly interested in her reminiscences of Slavonic and Romaic* folk-songs, and in the singular faculty she had for improvising, while she was seated at the piano, some little story of the same fashion, and adding to it a wandering, capricious accompaniment by way of mystical refrain. He had even begged her to give him one of these compositions; but she rarely committed them to paper; perhaps she was afraid that by accident they might come under the eye of some professional critic. Nevertheless, his request had remained in her mind; and happening one afternoon to find herself with a brief and unusual space of leisure she had roughly jotted down the haphazard lines and notes of a fragment; and that she had put away in her desk and forgotten. But now, as she took it out, she thought she would make a fair copy; and she thought she would send it to him—as a timid kind of propitiation, if there was any unknown cause of quarrel between them: in any case, by his manner of receiving this poor little peace-offering, he would show how he still regarded her. And thus it was that the proud-hearted Briseis brought herself to humble contrition (for she knew not what); and in the dark and still hours of the night she proceeded to copy carefully and clearly the irregular verses and the accompanying ripple of melody, though at the outset she spoiled three sheets of paper, because of tears that fell.

* modern Greek;

Παπαδοί, Παμφοί = Ελληνες

It was a simple enough story that she had heard or read of somewhere: the story of a small band of brigands overtaken by the soldiery, and in the forefront of the fray the young wife of the chief of the brigands, a peasant girl whom he had abducted not many months before. This was how it began—

*Saddest bride is the stolen bride, and Eleänaia is weeping.
Happiest bride is the stolen bride, and Eleänaia smiles.
Proud she stands by her husband's side, at bay in the mountains,
Proud when the gendarme's bullet speeds straight to her heart.
(Creep closer, child, the moonlight is white in the forest.)*

And then it went on to tell how the brigand, when his band had escaped, disguised himself, and went down to the nearest village, to try to obtain a permit that his wife should be buried in consecrated ground; and how his disguise was discovered, and himself taken and shot. But it was not of Eleänaia and her brave and luckless husband that Briseis was thinking as she went on with her transcription, scrupulously correcting here, and expanding there. Surely Frank Gordon could not be offended by her sending him this scrap of ballad-music, amateurish as it might be? He had asked for it, indeed—though that was awhile ago. And anyhow it would establish some kind of link between them; he would surely write in reply; perhaps there might be an explanation. He could not take it amiss!

Next morning it was still wet; but ere any of the

household were up, she had been out and along to the pillar letter-box, despatching her wistful, half-reluctant, tentative appeal for reconciliation. And still it rained, on and on; and hourly London became more gloomy, and squalid, and hideous. When it drew towards noon, there was no thought of the lame boy going out in his Bath chair; the day was too distressing; so he had to content himself with a seat at the window, and a bundle of those journals which he had found by experience gave the most dithyrambic accounts of the deeds of his heroes, whether on the muddy football field or on the windy and sea-haunted links of the north.

And so it was that a little before twelve Briseis was enabled to steal forth alone and perhaps unobserved to keep her appointment with Andreas Argyriades. Protected by water-proof and umbrella she made her way through the swimming streets; and at the corner she had mentioned to him she found her compatriot—looking very miserable indeed, for though he also carried an umbrella, it had proved inadequate to shield his Bank-holiday attire, and he now presented a somewhat damp and bedraggled appearance. Nevertheless his spirit was calm and unruffled; his self-confidence had suffered no abatement; and he received Briseis with a profound courtesy, watching her all the while.

“Have you brought an answer for me, and a definite answer?” she asked, abruptly and coldly.

“Pardon me, my dear friend, it is not so simple as perhaps you think,” he replied, in his usual suave manner. “There are many points to be regarded. For example, I have just learnt that my brother Demetri is coming to this country. Very well. When he arrives, what is the first question he will ask of me? He will say—‘Andreas, my son, what have you been able to make out of the Valieri-Lamprinos affair?’ He is so mercenary, is my brother Demetri! Then if I tell him some paltry sum, he will first laugh at me for a fool, but afterwards he will stab me. Ah, he is terrible—terrible—a famished wolf is merciful compared to him; he spares no one; and you—have you no fear for yourself if he is angry?—”

“Children’s tales!” she responded, with contempt. “Do you think you can frighten me with such foolishness?”

“Akousate me!” he pleaded, in silken speech. “I wish to be your friend; and you will need a friend—when Demetri arrives. And how can I give you a definite answer: how can I tell you the exact value he might place on all these papers? No, no; my dear young lady, be guided by me; furnish me with a small sum at present—ten pounds—twenty pounds—what you please—which will be a pacification for Demetri; then subsequently we will consider——”

“We will not consider!” she retorted. “Why should

I give you anything? Why should I give you a single drachma? It is only to get rid of you, once and for all; and if you refuse to agree to this conclusion, what is the alternative? The police, Mr. Argyriades!”

He shook his head, almost mournfully.

“Ah, no, you could not be so unwise,” he said. “What have I pointed out to you before?—that I have done nothing——”

“You have asked for money; you have threatened me; you have threatened to show these letters——”

“Where is your evidence, my dear friend? Have you a scrap of my handwriting as proof?” he said, in a kind of compassionate manner. “Ah, no, have done with that idea! If you appeal to your police—to your English law—I can suffer nothing; but you—you will have to suffer the publicity, the exposure; and perhaps your story will be believed, and perhaps it will not. It is so much better to be amicable! Give me twenty pounds—in the mean time—for pacification——”

“I have not a farthing!” she exclaimed.

“Ah, then we are wasting time,” he said, a little more sternly. “Shall I put the matter plainly to you, my dear friend? I have certain goods to sell; and they must go to the highest bidder. I have given you the opportunity; but you allow one day after the other to pass, and you do not provide yourself with the necessary funds, though you could easily do so. Well? Well,

I must go to another market, that is all. I know who will redeem those compromising documents—oh, yes, and at the figure I ask—and if I have already shown him a little sample, to tempt him——”

“Have you—dared?” she demanded, with her cheek grown a trifle paler: some wild fancy had shot through her brain that here might be the true key to the enigma that had been torturing her through the long dark hours.

“I do not say yes or no, for I do not wish to commit myself,” he answered her, calmly. “But at least you will consider what I have it in my power to do, at any moment. Oh, I confess to you that at first I was not so sure, when I was waiting and observing; for there are several young ladies in the house, and the Lord Fragkis Gordon he might be interested in one or the other: perhaps—shall I say it?—it was some little touch of expression on your part, when the name was mentioned, that convinced me I was on firm ground. For you understand, my dear friend, that though all the world must recognise that you are extremely beautiful—beautiful with a youthfulness and a freshness and an animation that not all of the prettiest of our Greek girls are happy enough to possess—all the world must see that; but all the world may not know how quick a tale-teller is the expression of your face, to one who has the skill to remark. So perhaps it was yourself who con-

firmed my earlier surmises? — but that is of little consequence; what I wish to make clear to you, perfectly clear, is that I am on assured ground. Those letters that you sent to me, are they not my property? May not I do what I choose with them? May not I sell them to whoever will give most for them? Therefore you cannot harm me; but I might harm you—if you were so imprudent as to drive me to extremities. Only, you will not do that. I am sure you will not do that. No; you will take into consideration many things: your own position; the serious costs I have incurred; and the advisability of pacifying Demetri. Is it not so? You will be wise and reasonable; and a wise and reasonable person accepts what is inevitable. Now, my dear friend, I cannot keep you standing here in the rain—it is dreadful; tell me, what can you give me that will propitiate Demetri when he arrives?——”

“I have nothing to do with him,” she said, hurriedly—but her attitude was less defiant. “I want back the letters you have of mine; and I ask you, once for all, what I must pay for them, to have an end. At present I have no money, as I told you before; but I have written to my trustee in Edinburgh, to see if he can let me have twenty-five pounds——”

“Yes; twenty-five pounds?” he repeated, in an encouraging way. “That would do very well to pacify Demetri——”

"I have nothing to do with Demetri!" she broke in again.

"But if he is bringing with him the Lamprinos letters?" he said, insidiously.

"And you said you had them here in London!"

"Ah, yes, I may have been a little premature—but that is nothing," he said, coolly enough. "Well, then, let us say that so far it is arranged: twenty-five pounds to propitiate Demetri. And after?"

"After?—not one lepta! No, nor one atom of communication between you and me! I must have the whole of the letters—every one of them: I will verify them myself; I will burn them myself; and then—nothing between you and me!"

"And all that is to come about for twenty-five pounds!" he said, elevating his eyebrows in affected surprise. "Really, if it were not so serious a matter, one might laugh. My dear young lady, you do not seem to comprehend: one does not undertake such trouble as I have encountered for a miserable twenty-five pounds—no, nor anything like that!——"

"What can I do more!" she cried, in a desperate kind of way—for the ingenuity of his arguments had confused her amidst her vague alarm and distress.

"But no, it is not for me to dictate!" he said, blandly. "As I have told you, you have rich friends—"

and they must know of your great expectations—and if you wish for money, why——”

“I cannot get more than that!” she protested—but more humbly now.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah, well, there is then the alternative. If one will not pay, the other must. I have only to show these letters to the person you are thinking of at this moment, and I have only to say to him ‘If you are interested in the young lady, would it not be generous of you to pay a considerable sum to withdraw such compromising documents from being handed about?’——”

“And you say you do not threaten!” she interposed, scornfully.

“Pardon me,” he answered her. “What I said was that you had nothing to show that I had threatened.—But come, come, my dear friend, I do not wish to threaten at all. Why should we quarrel? We are quite harmoniously agreed so far. You will send me the twenty-five pounds, to make the best bargain I can for you with Demetri. That is the first step——”

“And the last,” she said. “It must be first and last—or none. And if I send you the twenty-five pounds, how am I to know that you will return me the letters—every one of them?”

“You cannot trust me, then? Ah, that is the worst of having to do with one like Demetri,” he proceeded,

in a regretful fashion. "If it had not been for him, you would have had the packet long before now. But Demetri, he is insatiable. Never mind. You have done well. You have left me to deal with him. Do not fear. I will defend you against Demetri. Consider me the protector of your interests. You will send me the twenty-five pounds; and I will make the best bargain I can for you; and there will be no need to show these very strange letters, these very damaging letters, to any other person. You have done well, my dear friend, rest assured. It rejoices my heart to find you so placable, so reasonable. I give you my word of honour that you have resolved wisely. For what is the matter of a few pounds? What is a trifling matter of money to a beautiful young girl when her good name might be called in question——"

"My good name?" said Briseis—with a flash of her eyes.

"Ah, no, no—I meant by those who did not know her," he replied, softly. "That is a precious possession for a young girl, her good name; and of course you have acted with discretion. And it is so much pleasanter to have these amicable relations established. Need I tell you that if it had been war between us, it would have been a somewhat serious war? The famished wolf has no time to think of scruples; and here am I, in the most desperate of straits, and with Demetri coming over

to demand explanations. But that is all past now. All is to be amiable and pleasant. And when, if I may ask, do you expect to receive the twenty-five pounds?"

"To-morrow, perhaps, or next day," she said, almost mechanically—for her brain was perplexed and bewildered by the ingenuities of his representations.

"Ah, that is well," said he; "and may I as a last word congratulate you, my dear friend, on the wisdom of your decision? You have done well. Confide your interests to me; and I will secure you against Demetri Argyriades. Adieu, then—for the rain is terrible. Within the coming day or two I shall hear from you; until then—adieu!"

"Sas proskunō," she answered him, absently; and the next moment she found herself alone, standing there in the midst of this wet and dismal London.

The following two or three days were for Briseis Valieri little else than a prolonged agony of suspense and dim apprehension. Every ring at the door-bell caused her heart to jump; but the posts came and went, morning, noon, and evening, and not even a line arrived from Frank Gordon to say that her little propitiatory offering had been received. And then her heart would grow hot, and her cheek would tingle with maidenly pride and shame. Had she humbled herself only to be spurned? Had she placed herself in the position of a

suppliant, when indignant reserve and silence would have better become her?

The Edinburgh W. S. had promptly replied, enclosing his own cheque for the amount she had mentioned, and politely adding that it gave him pleasure to comply with her request. But she hesitated about sending the money on to Argyriades, not because of its value, but because she had a sort of despairing consciousness that it would not really and finally free her from the terrorism which he was endeavouring to establish over her. Nay, it might even more hopelessly involve her in the toils he was obviously trying to wind round her. It was only when he was talking to her—when he was exercising a devilish cunning in describing to her the helplessness of her position—that she felt ready to give him anything, to promise him anything, in order to get rid of him at once and forever: when she was outside the influence of his plausible speech, she could see clearly enough that whatever she might give or promise would only place her more completely within his grip. Unhappily she had already gone too far. She had sent him money; she had written urgent notes demanding the return of certain papers; she had referred to interviews, and made appointments. And how was all this to be undone by her forwarding to him the sum of money she had just received from Edinburgh? It would but place another weapon of coercion in his hands.

However, that disquietude, harassing as it might be, was now eclipsed by a greater that in a way arose out of it. When day after day passed and nothing had been heard in answer to her timid little presentation of the Greek ballad, she began to convince herself that Argyriades, in some measure at least, must have carried out his threat. Had he, then, gone to Frank Gordon, and, without actually showing documents, intimated that he had secrets to sell? Or had he taken with him one of the letters and produced it to see if he could find a purchaser for such compromising wares—one who, from magnanimous friendship or from any other motive could be induced to buy these things that he might destroy them? And what, she asked herself, in such circumstances would a straightforward young Englishman be likely to do? Why, without doubt, he would forthwith kick the scoundrel out at the door. Yes; but the knowledge would remain; and might be dwelt upon, and perhaps magnified. And who could wonder if this same clean-minded young Englishman should decline to have any further association with a girl who appeared to have doubtful antecedents, whose correspondence was passing about as bank-notes in the hands of blacklegs and blackmailers?

All this fretting and guessing may have unhinged her judgment a little; but gradually she became possessed with the resolve, at once piteous and imperious,

that at any cost she must set herself right with Frank Gordon. Whatever had happened, she must know the truth; whatever had happened, he also must know the truth. And she would go direct to himself. It was an unusual, perhaps an unmaidenly, thing to do; and it might involve a certain abasement; but it was too late to take such minor considerations into account. She would go direct to himself—and find out with her own eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

FACE TO FACE.

THE bronzed November sunshine was streaming into a spacious and lofty apartment in one of the Northumberland Avenue hotels; and up at the end of the room stood Lady Adela Cunyngham and Frank Gordon, talking to each other, and looking down the long tables that were laid out for luncheon, and that presented quite a pretty spectacle with their silver and fine linen, their glossy menu-cards, and their floral decorations of chrysanthemums and oldman's-beard.

"So kind of you to come and help me!" said the handsome young matron. "What should I have done—a poor lone woman arriving all by herself in London—not even Rose or Sibyl turning up to lend me a hand; and as for Sir Hugh—I suppose Sir Hugh will think he has fulfilled his part when he pays the bill. But I had no scruple about asking you, when I learnt you were in town; for you know, Sir Francis, we look on you as one of the family now, ever since we heard of your engagement. And, by-the-way, when is Georgie coming home, if her brother is so much better?"

"Soon, I believe," he answered her. "I have offered to go over to New York, to bring her back; but nothing definite has been settled."

Lady Adela cast another surveying and satisfied glance along the brilliant tables.

"Well, I think all is right now; and we may as well go into the reception-room. Oh, one moment, Sir Francis," she said. "I ordered the wines you mentioned; but I did not say anything as to quantities. Now, you know, Sir Hugh is the most generous of men; but he is business-like as well; and assuredly he will look into the account; and with regard to these wines, how is one to know what has been used—how will there be any check?"

"There will be Sir Hugh's cheque," he said, with a school-boy grin.

"I really do think I should have accepted the hotel proposal—so much a head——"

"Not at all!" he said, promptly. "There won't be any wine drunk—none to speak of. Do you think the Hypatians are likely to take wine at luncheon? If one of them should break out into wild carousal—a furious Maenad—she may put two lumps of sugar into her tea; but the orgie won't go further than that. Oh, there is Aunt Jean," he added, as he saw someone pass the door.

Accordingly the two of them went into the reception-

room, where Miss Jean Gordon was found to be the first comer.

"These milliners and their charges will just be the ruin of me!" said she—for she had come south to pay a series of visits, and was busily preparing for the same.

"Now, Aunt Jean," her nephew proceeded—for Lady Adela had turned away to receive the new arrivals—"I'll tell you about some of the people you are to meet——"

"But if they are as celebrated as you say, surely I'll recognise them by head-mark?"

"Well, yes, they are celebrated," he replied, somewhat evasively. "They are celebrated, certainly—but—but it's mostly amongst themselves they are celebrated. I don't know that their names have travelled as far as Dee-side. Anyhow, they are extremely important people; and mind, when you're talking to any of them, to put in a good word for Lady Adela's new novel——"

"Merciful me, laddie, I have not read a word of it!" cried Aunt Jean.

"No, nor has anybody else, for it isn't published yet," her nephew explained to her. "But why should you not be supposed to know all about it?—and these writing-people will put paragraphs in the papers, and make a stir—don't you understand that? Have the Dee-side folk got so little gumption as not to under-

stand that?—and why this elaborate entertainment is given? Now don't forget, Aunt Jean: the title is *Faded Jonquils*; and all kinds of well-known personages figure in it; it is a brilliant picture of society; the disguises are delightfully thin; if you're anybody at all, you'll recognise the whole crowd. One or two most distinguished critics have seen the proof-sheets, and are charmed; and she'll get a testimonial from Mr. G. or she's not the woman I take her for. Now let me see: I'd better tell you whom you'll sit next. On your left will be a Mr. Quincey Hooper—he's the London correspondent of an American paper; nothing to alarm you about him; he'll probably tuck the corner of his table-napkin under his chin, and he'll certainly talk all the time about lords; nothing worse than that. Then on the other side you'll have a Miss Penguin. She's a poetess—a great, wild, fearsome poetess. But you won't mind. She's a giddy old crock; and she'll tell you strange stories about a set of people whom she calls the aristocracy. She doesn't know anything about them; but that's neither here nor there; and she's a playful old kitten: you'll find her great fun. Oh, here's my beneficent Miss Caledon—I must go and speak to her"—and off he went to welcome the intrepid young lady-journalist, whose extremely pretty gray eyes appeared at this moment to have something of demure amusement in them.

Now if it was by way of a trick that Frank Gordon had foisted the Passionate Poetess on to poor, innocent, unsuspecting Aunt Jean, he was well served out. For when by-and-by this large company had sedately filed into the luncheon-room, and when they were engaged in finding out their appointed seats—and while the zither-choir from the Black Forest was playing “Alle Vögel sind schon da, alle Vögel, alle!” so that it seemed as if the birds of innumerable spring-times were hovering around and thrilling all the air with their vibrant melody—in the midst of this hum of confusion young Gordon became aware that a dowdy, pompous, overdressed woman was bearing down on him. He could not understand this at all, for he himself had written out the cards and placed them along the tables; but the next moment the explanation came from Miss Penguin, who now confronted him.

“I wished to have a little chat with you, Sir Francis,” said she, “and I took the liberty of transposing one or two of the cards——”

“Well, I’m hanged!” he wrathfully said to himself—which was improper, and also most impolite.

But there was no escape for him; her baleful eye was upon him; and the very first question she asked of him, as they sat down, was the identical question with which she had challenged him at the Hypatia Club.

"Have you read my *Mirrorings*?"

He desperately hunted about for a lie—in vain; and then he blurted out—

"I really don't know what the circulating libraries are coming to. You write to them for the best books, naturally; and they send you nothing but trash. And so—that is—the inexcusable reason——"

"I see," she observed, calmly. "You have not read my book. Consequently you have no answer to my indictment."

"Your indictment?"

He vaguely remembered that on that previous occasion this frowsy old frump with the pale protuberant fringe and the tattered finery had occupied herself chiefly in slandering her fellow-countrywomen, when she wasn't engaged in hacking and slashing at their husbands and brothers and sons; and also that she appeared to hold him, Frank Gordon of Grantly, responsible for all the ill doings and infamies of the "aristocracy" of Great Britain.

"Yes, my indictment," she proceeded, and she held him with her inexorable eye. "Perhaps you will allow me to repeat at least a portion of it."

"Lord help us!—I'm in for it again," said young Gordon to himself.

And he was. Worse still, he found himself between two fires; for while he had this infuriate spinster at his

elbow, on the other side of the head table, and not more than a yard or two from him, Octavius Quirk, in his frothily tempestuous fashion, was describing to Lady Adela and any others within ear-shot his doughty deeds in the field of journalistic criticism.

"Such a responsibility!" murmured Lady Adela, softly and sweetly. "Such an important newspaper——"

"The Moulinet—that's what I should like to call my department," continued the flabby-cheeked creature with the boiled-gooseberry eyes. "I want my lads to understand that they must have a free shoulder-swing! And we're doing excellent service, Lady Adela—oh, I assure you! The weekly log-rollers have got a fright: there's a good deal less croaking and calling of the frogs to each other since we began to heave bricks into the pond. And the puling poets in the Government offices—stealing the Queen's stationery to write their miserable magazine-verse on it: we've made one or two of them sit up. But the two tribes that we mean to slaughter—the two tribes that are to have no mercy—are the Cuttle-fish and the Worms——"

"I'm afraid I don't quite——"

"The Cuttle-fish—who fling ink in the face of the public, and hide themselves in a sham profundity. I'm an Englishman; I want English; I want the English of Milton, and Shakespeare, and Dryden; I don't want leerings, and twistings, and divings into the mud of

obscurity. And then there are the precious people—the posturers—strutting in front of a literary mirror and admiring themselves: well, we mean to thrash the sawdust out of their taffeta phrases, their ‘three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation, figures pedantical’; and we may be able to bring back something of the ‘russet yeas, and honest kersey noes.’ ‘He speaks not like a man of God’s making’: then he’ll have to change his tune; or we’ll drum the dandified ass out of existence——”

The wind-bag paused for a moment—for the zithers had begun to play “Es steht ein Baum im Odenwald”; but he soon ignored this interruption.

“Ah, the Worms, Lady Adela—I was almost forgetting——”

“Yes?” responded Lady Adela, in her pleasantest manner; while Gordon inwardly said to himself ‘O what a price one has to pay in England for puffs and paragraphs!’

“The Worms—the invertebrate literary things that live upon dead men’s reputations—and the greater the reputation the better. ‘Hallo,’ cries one or other of these nonentities, ‘let’s get out another edition of So-and-so; he has been dead a hundred years; and there’s no one to hinder us.’ And then the Nonentity brings out the book of the big dead author, and claps his own little name on the title-page, cheek by jowl with the

big name, and the public doesn't resent his impudence; no, the good, easy public buys the new edition; and the parasite comes in time to be recognised as a man of letters. Good business—living on dead authors! Well, we mean to make things lively for the Worms!" continued Mr. Quirk, with boisterous hilarity. "Since they are so determined on publicity, we mean to make them dance a little. Cuttle-fish—Worms—Posturers—Bardlets in search of a laureateship: we intend having a bit of amusement down our way! My lads are ready——" And so the Jabberwock held on; while Lady Adela paid him the tribute of a mute sympathy and reverence: when she had to pay a price, she paid it without stint.

A voice rose above the varied din—a girl's voice, rather hard and metallic, it is true, but clear and penetrating, and harmonising admirably with the zither accompaniment. "Von meinem Bergli muss i scheiden, was so liebli is und schön"—this was the old familiar strain; and Frank Gordon, who was sick-tired of journalistic chatter, and still more tired of hearing an exasperated unmarried female denounce the iniquities of husbands—young Gordon was glad to turn away and listen, entranced. Nay, as soon as the "Abschied vom Dirndel" was finished, he left his place and made his way round to the small table at which the Schwarzwaldler—three men and two girls—were seated; and

there he made bold to take a vacant chair that happened to be next the young lady who had just been singing; and he was proceeding, with many apologies, to tell her how everyone was grateful to her, when the damsel with the big, gentle eyes (he made sure her name was Anneli) interrupted him.

“Wie meinen Sie, mein Herr?” she said.

This was for a moment disconcerting; but he had some courage; and so with the best German he could muster he paid his compliments, and then added—

“Sie kennen vielleicht irgend einige griechische Volkslieder?”

“Das glaube ich nicht,” she answered, “will aber fragen.”

And with that she addressed herself to the grave-eyed, black-bearded man at the end of the table, who, in turn, answered young Gordon direct and in English, explaining that they were very sorry they did not know any Greek folk-songs. But this inquiry had formed a sort of introduction: and next Gordon said, in a straightforward and friendly way:

“Well, I have heard the zither played many and many an evening, in the Black Forest and the Tyrol: but never, as far as I can remember, without there being something on the table. Would you mind—if I tried to rectify a little mistake that I see has been made?”

And thereupon he went off and got hold of a waiter; and in a few moments he had returned, the waiter bringing with him a couple of bottles of Zeltinger, some green glasses, and a basket filled with comfits and sweet biscuits. The wine was poured out; the cakes were handed to the timid-eyed Fräulein; while young Gordon coolly and calmly resumed his seat—for he had a frank and boyish way of making himself at home that stood him in good stead among strangers. And indeed he found the society of these honest Schwarzwalders a good deal more congenial than that he had recently quitted. They drank his health, in a serious manner; he responded with the toast of “Deutschland über Alles!” and the Fräulein laughed as they sipped a little of the wine; then the leader of the choir, glancing round the table, said in an undertone “Compagneia,” and forthwith the glasses were shoved aside, and each zither had resting on it ten nerved finger-tips ready for the signal.

“Ich nehm’ mein Gläschen in die Hand”

he rolled out in a strong bass voice; then his companions came in with their chorus

“Vive la Compagneia!”

—and whether the general Compagneia over there at the long tables listened or did not listen was of little

consequence to Frank Gordon. He had escaped from the palpitating Sappho; he had escaped from the blustering wind-bag; he was among decent, kindly folk, who, in the intervals of their professional duties, became more and more friendly with the young Englishman who appeared to be well acquainted with their country and its homely customs. And truly they gave him of their best. It was for him they sang "Mariandel ist so schön, Mariandel ist so treu," and "Herzig's Schatzerl, lass dich herzen," and "Im Aargau sind zwei Liebi," and "Von allen den Mädchen so blink und so blank"; and then when the smoking began—for Lady Adela knew the ways of many of her guests, and was an astute and tolerant hostess—he had cigars brought for the bearded members of this little company; and altogether he and they got on very well.

And yet, notwithstanding the occasion and this good comradeship on which he had accidentally happened, he was heavy at heart. Some of these Volkslieder have a pathetic note, apt to awaken memories. And there was another folk-song, lying in his desk down in Jermyn Street, that would keep recurring to his mind, accusing and reproaching him. A dozen times he had taken out the sheet of MS. intending to write and say he had received it; and again and again he had shrunk from employing the cold and distant terms which alone were permissible to him. And what would Briseis be think-

ing of him now? Perhaps her wounded pride had stepped in to protect her: probably she would not deign to waste another thought on one who had used her so discourteously.

By this time the large luncheon-party had become in a measure nebulous—moving hither and thither and forming new groups; and the handsome young mistress of the feast could now pay a little more attention to her guests generally. Winning, gracious, and graceful, she went from one to the other, with an adroit word and a smile ever at her command; and if, during these random conversations, any reference was made to the forthcoming publication of *Faded Jonquils*, it was always with a modest deprecation on her part, as if her poor little book were not fit to be mentioned before all these wise and clever people. Amid this prevailing movement and clamour of talk it was easy for anyone to slip away unobserved; and Frank Gordon—having ascertained that Miss Jean was returning to her dressmaker, and would rejoin him in Jermyn Street later on—said a word of apology and good-bye to his hostess, and left.

When he reached his rooms he put his despatch-box on the table, and opened it, and drew in a chair. But it was not factors' reports he was after. He took out the large sheet of paper on which were copied so carefully and accurately the words and accompaniment of the Greek folk-song; and at these he sat staring

absently, as he had done too often before. The music, it is true, was far too intricate and elaborate for him even to guess at the sound of it; he was thinking rather of the patient labour and the neat handwriting; and of the desperate task that lay before himself. And yet he could not remain altogether silent. Nay, might not he be able to introduce into this note that had to be written—that he must write now—something of a farewell character? A formal and restrained farewell—that was what was demanded of him: though again and again his fingers had refused to pen the words.

It was just about this moment that there drew up at the corner of Jermyn Street a four-wheeled cab, from which a young woman descended. Her tall and elegant figure was dressed mostly in black; she was veiled—though the texture of her veil was thin enough to show that her complexion was somewhat colourless; and she had a preoccupied and hurried air. As soon as she had arranged with the cabman about waiting for her, she turned and went quickly along the pavement, giving no heed to anything around her, but glancing up from time to time at the number of this or that lodging-house or private hotel. At last she arrived at the one she sought. The outer door was open; the inner door, partially glazed, was about a yard or so within the hall; and it was with hardly a second of hesitation that she

stepped into this shallow entrance, and was about to ring the bell.

And then all of a sudden she withdrew her hand as if the bell-knob had burnt her with fire; she stood paralysed with confusion and fear and shame; her face was suffused with hot blood; her heart panting as if it would suffocate her. What was she here for?—she seemed to ask herself. Could this be the proud-spirited Briseis Valieri, come humbly and servilely to the door of a young man's dwelling, to beg for the re-establishment of her good name? Was this what she was here for?—to explain—to excuse—to vindicate? Her father—her mother—even the poor old man with whom she used to go wandering among the Scotch hills: what would they have said could they have foreseen? And then it swiftly occurred to her—might she not even now escape? Had no one observed her through those oblong panes of glass? The bell had certainly not been rung. And so, the next moment, she had vanished out of that entrance-way; and little did she know of what had befallen her until she discovered that she was staring into the window of a perfumer's shop, her whole frame tingling and trembling.

She gradually regained control over herself; her face resumed something of its natural hue; a passer-by would merely have thought that this tall and distinguished-looking young lady was regarding those hair-brushes

and scent-bottles with an unusual fixity of attention. For indeed what she had now to consider was the alternative that lay before her—a return to the hopeless suspense and misery of these past days and nights. She had strung herself up so far; and this wild endeavour of hers, the product of despair almost, had within it some gleam of hope; and now to abandon it—to go away back to the long brooding hours of anguish—that seemed a kind of impossible thing. She could not go back. She must have some assurance. She must know what had occurred. It was not a mere vindication of herself that was driving her on; it was as though all the coming years of her young life were calling to her, making a more imperative demand. And so, looking neither to the right nor to the left, she returned hastily to the entrance, and rang the bell.

A manservant appeared.

“Is—Sir Francis Gordon—at home?” she managed to say.

“I think I heard him come in, ma’am,” the man said; and he knocked at an adjacent door.

The next moment the door was opened; and Briseis found herself—she did not know how—advancing into a room the sole occupant of which, on seeing her, had instantly risen to his feet. And there she stood confronting him—unable to utter a word—dreading what she had done. It seemed at this crisis as if the proud

heart must straightway break, in the depth of her humiliation. And yet she looked at him. Had he nothing to say to her? Would he understand that a girl was imperiously bound to clear her good name?

And as for him: well, this sudden and actual bodily presentment of her had at once swept away all the dreams, and musings, and tempered resolves of the preceding days; and a passionate longing arose in him to go forward to her, and place his hands on her shoulders, and say to her: 'Briseis, let me guess why you have come here! Do not speak: it is for me to speak: and all that I have to tell you is, I love you!—I love you!—I love you!' Nay, the magnetism of her presence was overpowering; and her agitation—the appeal of her look—surely that was more than mortal man could withstand: why should he not take her to him, and kiss her hair, her cheeks, her lips, with 'I love you! I love you!' told again and again to her upturned eyes. And he would say to her: 'You are disturbed—you suffer: let me shield you, then; let us forget everything else in the world, and be a world to ourselves; let us go through life together—you and I, together!' And then, under the magic charm of youth and youth's response to persuasive caresses, there would come into her softened eyes some sign of yielding, of wistful self-surrender——

But this wild impulse, that thrilled him to the very

soul, had to be sternly restrained; pale, resolute, reserved, he stood before her, awaiting her commands; whether she knew or not, there were chains of honour binding him, as cruel as steel.

She found speech at last.

"You will forgive my—my coming here," she said, in a low voice. "I had not heard from you——"

"I was about to write to you," he said—and he glanced towards the table: if her eyes followed in that direction, they could not fail to see the sheet of MS. music lying there.

"And—and I was alarmed," she continued, rather brokenly. "Because—because I have been threatened——"

"You—threatened?" he repeated. "By a man or a woman?"

"A man."

"That might be made awkward," he said slowly.

"I was alarmed because—because he threatened to come to you, and show you some letters," she went on; and though outwardly she maintained her self-control, there was a suggestion of tears in her voice. "And when you did not write, I thought he had been to you—I thought you had believed him—that you suspected me——"

"Who is this man?" he asked.

"Andreas Argyriades. You saw him one morning

in Devonshire Place, just as you came up. And he has not been to you?"

"Not at all."

"Nor written to you?"

"I have had no communication with him of any kind—I never heard of him before!" he exclaimed. "But whoever he is, do you imagine I would believe any story or report or rumour against you brought by an ill-wisher of that kind? I think the reception he would meet with would convince him of the extreme unwisdom of his attempt."

"Oh, yes—yes—I am certain of that," she said, in an almost incoherent fashion; and she seemed half-stupefied, and distraught, and unstrung. For these assurances of his, grateful as they might be to her ears, contained no explanation whatever of the graver mystery of his change of demeanour towards her. And how was she to ask for that? There was a limit even to her piteous abasement. "Only," she continued, in this nervous way—"only—I wished you to understand about Argyriades—I wished you to know—about Argyriades; and if he should write to you—or call upon you——"

"Then he shall have his answer," Gordon said, with firm lips. "And perhaps it will be an answer that he will remember throughout his life."

"And you will forgive—my coming here—and inter-

rupting you. I know I should not have done so—but I was troubled—and you had not written——”

“I am exceedingly sorry I did not write before,” he said. And in truth at this juncture he had need of all his self-command; for the sight of her distress and a certain touch of pathos in the tone of her voice were wellnigh overmastering him: it seemed so natural that, throwing all other considerations to the winds, he should go to her, and clasp her to the shelter of his arms, and soothe her shaken spirit with tender and comforting words. But he held back: if there must needs be an explanation, this was not the moment: her mere presence here, in this room, was all too bewildering a thing.

“Good-bye, then,” she said, and she extended her hand. “You will forgive me for troubling you—for coming—but I was in great doubt and perplexity—about Argyriades——”

He held her hand in his: so much he could not deny himself.

“Do you remember Aunt Jean at Grantly?” he said to her, in a very gentle fashion. “She is in London at present; and I expect her here every minute. Won’t you stay and see her?—she would be so glad.”

“Oh, no, I cannot—I cannot,” Briseis said, hurriedly. “I must go.”

But if it was her wish to get away unobserved from

this embarrassing situation she was foiled; for just as he was opening the door into the hall, there came a ring at the outer bell.

“That must be Aunt Jean,” he said.

CHAPTER VII.

DER EWIGE GESANG.

It was a disconcerting and even a perilous moment for all three; a single false note of hesitation might have been disastrous; but the sagacity, the womanly instinct, and the native kindliness of Jean Gordon triumphed: in a second she was mistress of the situation.

"Dear me," she said to the girl, "to think that you are just the one person in the town of London I was most wishing to see—and you were going away! Na, na; you'll just come up to my own little parlour, and we'll have a chat together: why did not my nephew here tell you I was to be in directly? Come along now—dear me, to think I might have missed you!" And therewithal, in some mysterious manner, Briseis found herself conducted to a moderately small apartment on the next floor, which turned out to be Miss Jean's sitting-room.

But although she might be temporarily unnerved, Briseis Valieri was too proud to have anything to do with false pretences. She remained standing.

"I must tell you, Miss Gordon," she said, almost as

a kind of challenge, "that I did not know you were in London."

"You did not? Well, well!" was the placid answer—though the shrewd gray eyes were attentive.

"I did not," Briseis went on, striving to be perfectly calm. "I came to see Sir Francis; and I expected to find him alone. I came to learn from himself if he had been told anything about me by—by a countryman of mine. It was a wrong thing for me to do. I know that. I know that perfectly well. But—but I was desperate; and perhaps—perhaps, Miss Gordon—if you heard the whole story, you would not think so badly of me——"

Indeed there was no thought of evil in those kindly and scrutinising gray eyes; there was nothing but an obviously affectionate interest; and it was in the gentlest fashion that Miss Jean persuaded her unexpected visitor to remove her cloak and sit down. Then came the inevitable suggestion about tea; but that Briseis put aside; she was too anxious to tell her tale, and explain how she had been induced to place herself in so ambiguous a position. And as that tale, rapid, eager, and rather piteous, was being told, a somewhat remarkable thing occurred. Aunt Jean had taken up from the table a Japanese paper-knife, and at first she had merely occupied herself in idly passing her fingers over the metallic figures; but as the story of Argyriades and his

proceedings went on, she got hold of the instrument in both her hands, and she was unconsciously bending it this way and that while she was earnestly exhorting her companion to exercise an absolute self-control.

“Yes, yes, my dear—there is no use in anger—you must be cool and collected,” she said, in little gasps of sentences, while her double grip on the paper-cutter did not cease. “And I may tell you you’ve come to us just in time. That scoundrel was only beginning to get a hold over ye. I can see his intention. I’m older than you. It was not five pounds—or fifty—that he wanted; he wanted to bleed ye like a leech, and to terrify ye into going on your knees to your friends, for more, and more, and more. Oh, the scoundrel!—yes, and he thought he could get money from Frank? Well, he’ll get something from Frank. My word, he’ll get something from Frank! For ye’ve just come to us in time, my dear young lady, before he got complete hold over ye: oh, ye did right to come—I maintain ye did right to come: a young girl’s good name is everything to her: it’s her very life: and if she thinks she has been slandered, is she not likely to be driven desperate? But then, you see, in such a predicament—face to face with such a treacherous scoundrel—one must take care to keep perfectly quiet and cool. Anger will not do. Indignation will not do. And some of us Gordons about Dee-side—I mean the menfolk of us—are said

to be rather quick in the temper; and it never serves to let temper loose. No, no. We must be quiet and cautious in dealing with a smooth-tongued miscreant like that. I confess," Aunt Jean continued—and the short sentences were becoming more and more vehement and envenomed—"if I were myself to see him—I might be tempted—to say a word: I suppose—I suppose—a smack across the face—from a woman's hand—would not hurt him—— But no, no—as I tell ye, that would not do—we must give ye good advice—cool and calm advice—and ye see that, even in talking of the infernal rascal, I can keep quite easy and collected——"

The metal knife could no longer withstand this nervous bending; with a sudden snap it sprang in two; and Jean Gordon looked helplessly at the fragments.

"Dear me," she said, "they're useless things: I forgot I had it in my hand"—and once more she endeavoured to impress on Briseis the supreme importance of remaining scrupulously tranquil and calm-blooded, if Andreas Argyriades were to be encountered on equal terms.

For the last few moments Briseis had been plunged in profound abstraction.

"Miss Gordon," she said, at length, "it is very kind of you to think of trying to help me against that man;

but—but I would rather not trouble Sir Francis any further in the matter——”

“What?” exclaimed her warm-hearted partisan, “are you going back into slavery? Are ye deliberately laying up for yourself years of misery, until this blackguard finds there’s nothing more to be squeezed out of either your friends or you?——”

“Oh, no,” Briseis said. “I am less afraid of him now. Sir Francis has assured me he will not believe one word Argyriades has to say, whether he calls or writes——”

“Bless me, Frank Gordon is not the whole world!” Miss Jean protested. “And a young lady cannot afford to have a number of her letters—well, I will not use the word compromising—but private and confidential letters, I suppose—she cannot afford to have such things in the possession of a man who is determined to make an ill use of them.”

“Compromising?” Briseis repeated, with a rose-red flush appearing in her pale and exquisite complexion. “You must not say that, Miss Gordon. They could only be considered compromising by someone quite ignorant of the circumstances. Love-letters they are, that is true—silly and romantic love-letters; but anyone ought to be able to see that they are merely a heap of school-girl nonsense. A school-girl prank it was; for we all pretended to be in love with George

Lamprinos—he was the music-master; and I wrote these letters for mischief mostly, confiding them in secrecy to my chief friend and companion, Irene Argyriades, on the understanding that she was to read them and destroy them. Lamprinos never saw a single line of any one of them—of course not!—he would have laughed, and understood well enough: school-girls are always playing such tricks. And then Irene, instead of burning these scrawls, appears to have kept them; and then her brother finds them, and thinks he can make money—not so much out of them, perhaps, as out of the other notes I wrote to him, demanding their return. But I am less anxious now——”

“They must be got back,” said Miss Jean, firmly. “And it’s Frank Gordon must get them back for you.”

“Oh, no, you must not ask him—please do not!” said Briseis, hurriedly. “It is not necessary. I will get them back myself——”

“You—to deal with a vagabond like that!” said Aunt Jean, in kindly scorn. “It’s somebody with a stronger nerve than either you or I have must take up this affair; and though my nephew Frankie is just as easy-going and good-humoured a lad as ever I met with in all my life, still he’s got a most merciless temper—I will admit that—he’s got a perfectly heathenish temper if there’s been any wrong-doing or underhand

dealing where those next him are concerned: I'm thinking if your Greek gentleman knew who was after him, he would be up and off and out o' this country in two skips and a jump. So you'll just give me the man's address, and I'll jot it down; and, my dear young lady, you'll put all these fears and apprehensions out of your mind—for well can I see what ye must have suffered."

Then Briseis rose to go, and as her last word she said, rather wistfully—

"Then—Miss Gordon—you do not blame me—for having come here alone—when I was in such great trouble?"

"Blame you?" said Aunt Jean, and she took the girl's hand in hers, and kissed her on the cheek as an elder sister might have done. "I think I should find it difficult to blame ye for anything! But whatever happens, if you should be in want of a friend, just you come to Jean Gordon, and ye'll not find her to fail ye." And again at the door below she reiterated these expressions of affectionate sympathy, in a way altogether unusual with her, for most folks considered her rather a cross-grained and sharp-tongued woman. Then Briseis took her leave; and after that Aunt Jean remained for a minute or two in the hall, considering, before she would enter her nephew's room.

When at last she opened the door, she found Frank

Gordon pacing to and fro in great agitation; but at sight of her he stopped short.

"Frank, lad," said she, in an unwontedly grave fashion, "what is all this?"

"Oh, I don't know, Aunt Jean," he said. "I don't know!"

He took another restless step or two up and down, and again he confronted her.

"What do you think, Aunt Jean? I want you to tell me what I'm to do! Things were bad enough before—when I thought I had only my own mischance to face—but now——"

"Ay, and is that the way the land lies?" she said, regarding him curiously. "You as well? Frank, lad, you don't mean that! Mercy me, what is going to happen to us all! But you don't mean that!——"

"Yes, yes; and you've got to tell me what I am to do, Aunt Jean—that is the first and foremost thing——"

She paused for a moment or two, to collect herself. Then she said deliberately—

"Well, Frank, there's many would say I ought to have no skill of such matters. But I have seen something of the ways of young folk; and I have kept my eyes open, and what I am certain sure of is that that girl's coming here by herself to-day can mean but the one thing—that she is wildly in love with you. There's

no other accounting for it: the fear of having been mis-called to you seems to have driven her fairly out of her mind. And even then I can hardly understand it—now that she's away—for when she's near you there's a kind of glamour about her, she's so bewitching with her beauty and her pleading eyes that you're ready to swear a white-winged angel is a poor kind of creature compared with her; but now—but now when one thinks of it—that she should have risked being suspected of making a confession—confessing the secret that a girl keeps deepest down in her own heart—that she should have run such a risk even remotely is hard to comprehend, unless she's been just driven frantic by that man. For of course she knows you're engaged to be married?”

“Oh, no, she doesn't,” he replied, hastily. “At least, I suppose not—there was never a word said about it——”

Aunt Jean uttered a little half-stifled cry.

“Frank Gordon, what do ye tell me?—what have you done? She does not know? The poor lass!—the poor lass!—now I can see why she came here this afternoon—she felt that it was the happiness or the misery of her life that had to be settled. And it's the misery, I suppose. I suppose it's the misery. What have you done, man!—what have you done! Why did you not tell her—long ago?——”

“Why, how could I tell her, Aunt Jean!” he re-

sponded, almost angrily—for his conscience seemed wholly to acquit him. “Bethink yourself, Aunt Jean! How was I to imagine that it could concern her in the least? If I had dared to assume such a thing, then perhaps I might have told her. But such an assumption—the impertinence of it!—the insolence of it!—it never entered my head that it could matter a brass farthing to her whether I was engaged to be married or not. Only, when I found, of a sudden, that I had grown too fond of her, then I did what was left for me to do: I gave up going to the house; and I was trying to pave the way for our becoming absolute strangers to each other. It appeared to me that was all I could do; and I had hoped to bear my own fate without any human creature being a bit the wiser. But as for explaining to her that I was engaged to be married: why, there were other girls in Mrs. Elliott’s house besides Briseis Valieri: was I to go to each of them, or to all of them together, and say to them ‘Look here, I consider myself such a transcendently fascinating person that I must warn you beforehand that I am not to be captured’? That would have been a modest precaution! Indeed there was no nonsense of the kind in the air. We were amusing ourselves—theatres, concerts, a bit of a dance now and again: who was to imagine that any tragedy was to spring out of it all?—”

He was silent for a space. His whole being seemed rent asunder with conflicting passions; on the one hand his heart kept whispering to him in secret and delirious exultation "Rejoice!—rejoice!—the woman you love loves you: the crowning glory of life is yours"; while in response to that the calmer pulses of his brain would keep repeating the old inexorable burden "Renounce—renounce!—to you also has come the common lot of mortal man—*Entbehren sollst du!—sollst entbehren!*" And at last he threw himself into a chair, his clinched fists on his knees, his head somewhat bent forward, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"I suppose I've been to blame, Aunt Jean," he said. "Take it that way—and tell me what I am to do. I am ready to bear the penalty—if there's anything that can be undone, if there's anything that can be put right. What am I to do? Is there any atonement—any sacrifice?"

"Frank, laddie," said Aunt Jean, "you're not the first that has found his word given one way and his heart turned another; and ye need not seek for more sorrows than ye're likely to meet; for it's a sore strait to be in. And as for blaming you, that will I not. I'm beginning to suspect there's a simple enough explanation why you never told her of your engagement; and it's just this, that you were in love with her all the time, or drifting into being in love with her—unknown

to yourself—and that's why ye could not bring yourself to tell her——”

At this he looked up quickly: Miss Jean's shrewd guess seemed to have struck home.

“Then it is all due to my blindness,” he said, slowly, and as if to himself. “And there is no recalling—no reparation. . . . Aunt Jean, would you go to her, and speak to her? Will you tell her why I have recently kept away from the house—why I did not answer her letter? I know it is a great deal to ask; for it is a terrible business; but it is just maddening to think that she may consider herself slighted—imagine such a thing!—Briseis Valieri—slighted and left aside!——”

“Yes, but that's what may be in her heart, and likely to remain there all the days of her life, unless you go to her yourself, Frank,” said Aunt Jean, calmly.

“I? She would be insulted!”

“You must go,” said Aunt Jean. “You cannot part with her forever—I suppose it is forever, according to the chances of the world—without a last word of good-bye, surely. That would be strange conduct towards a girl that has been none too well treated—I don't mean by you, Frank—I don't mean by you—I mean almost ever since we got to know of her existence. And who would have thought it? Do you remember her that

day at Grantly? She looked as if all the world around her were laughing in kindness towards her. She looked so young, and winning, and splendid; she seemed to shed a kind of delight whichever way she turned; and she was so willing to be pleased—so grateful—not presuming on her great beauty, as many a girl would. Who could have prophesied anything but the fairest of the earth for her? She seemed born to happy circumstances, and tender guidance, and loving-kindness from those around her—which she could well repay—which she could well repay, I will say that. And now—poor lass!—poor lass!——”

And at this point Aunt Jean rose, and turned away from him, and remained standing there for several seconds, with her handkerchief up to her eyes. It was a most unusual break-down for her, and she was ashamed. When she came back to her place, she spoke in a very different key.

“Frank Gordon,” she said, “there’s one thing you’ve got to do, to show the man that’s in you. You’ve got to call that scoundrel to account.”

“Oh, that’s all right—that’s nothing,” he said, impatiently. At this moment he had no thought to waste on Andreas Argyriades. It was of Briseis he was thinking; and his heart was full of pity, and remorse, and an unspeakable longing and yearning and solicitude.

“But it’s not nothing—it’s something,” said Miss Jean, hotly. “Perhaps ye do not understand under what terrorism that girl has been living of late?—perhaps ye do not think of what she must have suffered before she underwent the humiliation of coming here, to defend herself? Is that nothing? Is that to be passed over? Consider what she must have gone through before she brought herself to this door—before she rang the bell; and is there to be no punishment for the blackguard that brought her to such a pass? Is there to be nothing done? Ye’re not going to leave it to me to take a horsewhip? Am I to find him out? Am I to lash him?—the scoundrel!—the scoundrel!—”

“Aunt Jean,” he said, in answer to her passionate invective, “that’s all easy enough. If everything else were as easy! Thrashing Argyriades will not put matters straight!”

“But thrashing Argyriades is the first thing that lies before ye,” she persisted, in her indomitable way. “And I want to know how and when ye mean to set about it.”

“There won’t be any difficulty,” he said. “Only I suppose I shall have to telegraph to Wentworth to send me up my thickest shooting-boots.”

“Ay,” said Miss Jean, eagerly, “and ye’ll kick him

across the street—and ye'll follow him—and kick him back across the street again——”

“I can try,” her nephew said. “Unless he varies the performance by kicking me.”

Aunt Jean pulled herself together.

“No, no—there must be no folly or rashness,” she said, severely. “It’s what I’ve just been maintaining—we must keep quiet and cool if we’re to deal wi’ this sleek-spoken rascal. It’ll not do to land yourselves both in the police courts, and have names mentioned, and a story for people to gabble about. Oh, he knew well what he was after, that miscreant, when he laid his plans! The letters he got—letters written by one school-girl to another school-girl, for mere mischief’s sake—these were harmless enough, and useless enough to him; but when he got other letters demanding them back—and when she was foolish enough to send him £5 as a beginning—then he had a better hold. Frankie, lad, it’s for you to make him let go—but discreetly—discreetly. If he’s got his fingers on the gunwale of the boat, chop them off, or give him a clour on the head: only, there must not be a ripple on the water afterwards. No police proceedings. The public are quick to believe the worst: how are they to know that these letters were but a piece of mischief-making between two school-girls—about a music-master—who never saw a single line of them?——”

She had gradually weaned him back from wider and more distracting thoughts to this bit of business immediately on hand: he began to take an interest in it.

"What you say is quite right, Aunt Jean," he answered her, presently. "There must be no police proceedings. We must catch him some other way—and give him a dose that will last him for the rest of his life. Of course the animal was counting on impunity; they all do that; they reckon that their victim will suffer anything and sacrifice anything rather than face a public scandal. It comes to this, Aunt Jean, that the blackmailing of an innocent person is the one crime the law cannot punish without hurting the innocent person more than the guilty one. Very well: when the chance offers we must step in and assist the law with a little private enterprise——"

"Ay, now ye're talking sense, Frankie, lad!" she said, with obvious and extreme gratification. "And what will ye do? Ye must serve him well! What are ye thinking of doing?"

"That must be a matter for careful and pious consideration, Aunt Jean," he answered her. "But as he appears to have been dealing in terrorism, I propose to give him a sample of his own wares—something just about sufficient to frighten the soul out of his body, as you might say. And in the mean time I will take a

run up to Oxford, this afternoon or to-morrow morning: I know one or two of the lads there who would like to join in a little frolic. This is his address, is it! Soho, of course. I suppose he'll have a knife about him. However, we must try to keep out of the police courts—anything short of that.”

Indeed for the time being he seemed to welcome this definite action demanded of him as a relief from the distressing perplexities that lay ahead; and while Miss Jean remained with him his brain was busy with projects by means of which he might outwit the wily Greek. But when she left (there had been a ring at the door, and she judged that certain of her purchases had arrived) he relapsed into contemplation of a future that appeared black and hopeless enough. His imagination was haunted by two figures: the one that of the proud-spirited Briseis, now wounded to the quick, and hiding herself away in her humiliation and shame; the other that of the light-hearted Georgie, soon to be coming gaily home, and little guessing that she would be received by an unwilling lover, who, to save his pledged word, must become a hypocrite husband. How, he asked himself again and again, had such a state of things arrived? Who was to blame? And what was to be done, by way of reparation or atonement, if any such thing were possible? Should he meet Georgie Lestranger with a frank explanation, and beg of her to

forego her claim? Why, that were the very depth of meanness and disloyalty and cowardice! Should he go to Briseis and say "I love you: you love me: let us break and cast aside all other bonds!" But was the proud Briseis likely to accept a dishonoured and dishonouring passion? Whichever way he turned, he saw no guidance or ray of hope; and all the while his heart, in its wild desire and despair, was secretly urging him to let his honour go. How many minutes would it take him to drive to Devonshire Place? Would he find Briseis alone? If he held her hands in his, and forced her to meet eyes with eyes, surely she would listen to the fervour of his appeal! Love would as ever be supreme and triumphant—even at the cost of a broken troth; and in the exultation and delirium of a new-found happiness, who was to remind them how it had been come by? These were agonising temptations: in mere self-defence—to gain some quiet for his over-tortured spirit—he compelled himself to turn to Argyriades and the possible methods of overreaching him. This was an immediate duty—and so far right welcome.

And in the mean time Jean Gordon had gone upstairs to her own room, her alarm over these tragic happenings being almost lost in the unholy and vindictive joy of knowing that soon, and effectively, retribution was about to fall on the creature who had driven Briseis Valieri to desperation. As she opened these

packages of finery she was crooning to herself an aimless little song—a Dee-side song—that certainly had not much to do with the graver matters that had just come into her life:

*O fair was the dawning and fair was the day
When I met with young Donald in Cambus o' May;
He called me his dawtie, he called me his dear,
He asked if I'd marry, without any fear.*

*When the sugar was bought, and the tea, and the meal,
I should have gone home to Kincardine o' Neil;
But Donald's old mother she asked me to stay,
And consent to a wedding in Cambus o' May.*

*Three pipers came down from Pannanich Wells;
They fired off the cannon; they rang all the bells;
O the march to the church it was gallant and gay,
When us two were married in Cambus o' May.*

*And now I'm a widow, gray-haired and alone;
And the folks in Glen Muick are hard as a stone;
And I sit by the fire, and I think of the day
When young Donald met me in Cambus o' May.*

It was a simple song, of simple people, living away by themselves in the remote Aberdeenshire valleys; it had apparently but little connection with any plans and schemes of vengeance to be visited on a Greek blackmailer, here in this teeming town of London.

CHAPTER VIII.

JUDGE AND JURY.

OF a sudden a shaft of light shot through this impending gloom: it was a letter from Georgie, who wrote in the blithest of spirits, vaunting herself as a physician and healer of men, and forgetting all about her sham nostalgia in view of her approaching voyage home.

"The fact is, I had to jeer him into convalescence!" Miss Georgie proceeded. "My diagnosis of the case was that in the weakness following the fever he had allowed his nerves to multiply themselves upon themselves (if I knew Greek I would give you a name for this process that would convince you at once); he had even begun to think about dying; and I had the greatest difficulty in persuading him that dying was the very stupidest thing that anyone could do, and that thinking of it was next door to an invitation. The doctors had half-murdered him with drugs. Why *will* they go on like that? They're awfully nice men; and at dinner they can tell you most amusing stories when they choose; instead of which they go about the country breaking the sixth commandment. I know I'm an

awful fool (it's quite sweet to call yourself names, and to think that no one else dare) but I saw what was to be done with Percy; I stopped those abominable fluids, and fed him on things that gave his rebellious gorge a little rest; and I jibed at him and jeered at him; and then he had to waken up to answer me according to my cheek. And now he vows and swears he will never let himself sink into that condition again; so I am going home with a light heart. And it's *awfully* good of you, my gallant chieftain-boy, to offer to come over to New York; but it isn't in the least necessary; for I'm going back under the wing of quite a company of young folks that the de la Penas know, and what's more to the purpose I calculate that we're likely to have a ripping good time. The party is ultimately bound for Algiers and other Mediterranean places; and consists of Miss Madeline Phayre and Miss Janie Phayre, sisters, Miss Romanes, Mr. S. F. Quentin, of Chicago, and Mr. Algeciras, of this neighbourhood—along with a Madame St. Roche, who is to play duenna; and as the two gentlemen are engaged respectively to the two sisters, I imagine that Miss Romanes and I may have *a little fun* during the voyage—never mind, all property kidnapped or stolen during the passage over to be honourably restored to the legal owner on the steamer's arrival at Liverpool. But you will be at Liverpool, I suppose? And you won't scowl if they hint that

we've been having games? Because it's *so hideously* dull on board ship—unless there's a little quiet skylarking afoot."

And so she went on, in a tone and fashion that reassured him exceedingly. For he had been looking forward with an indefinable dread to that first meeting with Georgie Lestrangle, whether it was to take place in Liverpool or New York; he had begun to fear she might discover what had happened, and might scornfully reject the only atonement he could offer. But these gay, rambling pages once more brought the real and living Georgie before him, and seemed to say to him that he might lay aside his vague apprehensions. She was not likely to prove exacting as regards romantic sentiment. Exalted moods—the language of passion, simulated or true—would only make her laugh. How it was—he reminded himself, as he was walking quickly through the crowded thoroughfares of London, in the direction of Soho—how it was that an evening saunter into the solitude of a deer-forest should have suddenly melted Miss Georgie into tears and brought about a mute confession that had bound their two lives together, he had never been able quite to determine. Nor could he clearly understand why, ever since that engagement, he had found himself under the necessity of arguing with himself and proving to himself that he was the luckiest of men. However, these demonstrations and

conclusions remained. They were as sound now as ever they were. And the merry, and mischievous, and happy-go-lucky young minx who had thus buoyantly written to him would not be too exigent in the matter of love-making; her audacious spirit would take little heed of trifles; and all would go well. Yes, all would go well—except in one direction: of which he dared hardly think.

When Frank Gordon reached his destination in Soho, and rang the bell, the evil-visaged harridan who answered the summons informed him, in reply to his question, where he would find Mr. Argyriades, but did not offer to accompany him; accordingly he ascended the dusky stairs alone, he knocked at a certain door, and then, hearing some unintelligible sound, he made bold to enter. The first object that met his eyes, in this squalid little room, was the figure of a young man in shirt sleeves and stockinged feet, who was seated on the edge of a bed, and who was engaged in carefully varnishing a pair of patent-leather boots; the next thing he perceived was that this young man, looking up from his employment, suddenly grew livid—his pale and unwholesome skin changing to the hue of one of the lighter-coloured jades. It was but a momentary exhibition of fear; Argyriades made a desperate effort at regaining his ordinary coolness and assured demeanour;

and if that peculiar tinge still remained in his face, his manner betrayed no immediate alarm.

And as for the tall, handsome, fresh-complexioned lad who now stood at the door of this vile-smelling den, he also had need of all his self-command. For it would have been so easy to step forward, and seize this coward creature by the neck, and shake him like a rat; and indeed, for one hot moment, the temptation—seeing the scoundrel face to face—and thinking of the story that Briseis had told—was almost irresistible. But Frank Gordon had vowed vows. He was going (the guileless English youth!) to be as coldly diplomatic as Miss Jean herself could have desired. He had come to circumvent a blackmailer; not to ply cudgels, and have names mentioned in a police-court. Hands off was his watch-word; though the natural man within him was tingling.

And so he said, with a careful politeness—

“Your name is Argyriades, I believe?”

By this time Argyriades had put aside his boots and the blacking-pot.

“Please,” said he, in broken English, “the Lord Fragkis—speak French.”

This was a contingency that Gordon had not faced, or he would have framed some judicious sentences be-

forehand; so that he had now to blunder on as best he might; and at no time was his French too fluent.

"I understand," he said, "that you have some letters belonging to a lady—whose name need not be mentioned."

"Monsieur has been misinformed," was the instant and suave rejoinder. "These letters are in the possession of my brother Demetri."

Again young Gordon was disconcerted—at the very outset. It seemed so much more simple (and desirable) to take this fellow by the scruff of the neck, and heave him about the room. But vows are vows.

"At all events you know where they are," he resumed, "and I take it you could get hold of them and hand them over, for a consideration: is not that so?"

The young man with the café-and-toothpick complexion shrugged his shoulders.

"It is possible," he said.

"How much of a consideration?"

"But Monsieur is a little too brusque. I have not undertaken to sell those letters—no; I come in as an intermediary, to establish amicable relations; I know the inexorable nature of my brother Demetri, and I wish to mitigate his demands. It is as a friend that I offer my services——"

"Oh, drop that——" And again Frank Gordon stuck fast. For the life of him he could not remember the

French equivalent for "rot," if there is any French equivalent for that bit of English slang. At last he fell back on *bêtise*. "Oh, drop that stupidity!" he exclaimed. "I have heard all about your brother Demetri—and your admirable disinterestedness. It is a familiar farce, my friend; but we are not infants. What I want to know is this—Can you put your hands on those letters, and bring them to me, guaranteeing that not one is missing; and if you can do that, when will you do it, and what will your price be? Of course you know that you have already placed yourself in a very serious position——"

"I have guarded myself, Monsieur," the young man answered, with the faintest trace of a smile.

"If there were a prosecution——"

"There will be no prosecution."

"And so you think you are safe?" Gordon said, regarding him in an apparently dispassionate manner. "You are of opinion you can do this sort of thing with impunity. You subject a perfectly innocent girl to a brutal terrorism; you extort money from her; you threaten, if she does not get you more, to compromise her in the eyes of her friends——"

"Your proofs of all this?" Argyriades said, quietly.

Another exasperating pause. It would have been so much easier to have settled this matter with fists! But still he sternly stuck to his diplomacy.

"Enough of words," he said. "Listen, if you please. I am going down to Henley this afternoon, and may be there some time. If you can get possession of those letters and bring them to me the day after to-morrow—take down the address—Red Lion Hotel, Henley on Thames—then I will give you a fair price for them. Do you understand?—Henley—Red Lion Hotel—you go from Paddington station—the Great Western——"

Argyriades reached over for his coat, took out from one of the pockets a soiled envelope, and, with a little assistance in the way of spelling, managed to jot down the address.

"And—and what may one expect, Monsieur, in recompense for these valuable papers?"

"I said a fair price," was the impassive reply.

"Monsieur is no doubt generous, as are all the English milords. Nevertheless, one would prefer to be a little more exact——"

"I said a fair price."

"Yes, perfectly—but still——"

"Then perhaps you yourself would have the goodness to name a figure?"

Argyriades looked up quickly.

"Five hundred pounds."

There was neither protest nor scornful rejection.

"Five hundred pounds is a large sum," Gordon said, slowly.

“Perhaps—but look at the value of these papers, Monsieur!” Argyriades made answer, with unwonted eagerness. “Consider their value. Consider the harm they might do—if they were to fall into unfriendly hands. My word of honour, it is not too much to pay to shield a young lady’s reputation! Consider the position in which she has placed herself—the testimony these letters bring against her——”

In an instant all the situation was changed. Gordon sprang to his feet and strode forward a step—his eyes burning and glaring.

“Another such word—you infamous cur—and I will choke the life out of your miserable body!”

“Monsieur!—Monsieur!” Argyriades exclaimed—and strangely enough he picked up his boots and hurriedly put them on. “If there is to be violence, I must go out and seek help. Of what use is force—is rage? You cannot compel me to give up the letters unless I wish. I appeal to the magistrate for protection—if you wish for an exposure, very well——”

By this time he had got on his coat too——But Gordon at once passed to the door, intercepting him.

“No, you don’t leave this room until we come to some arrangement—of one kind or another——”

“Very well, Monsieur, very well,” Argyriades replied in an injured tone. “I am indeed willing to come to an agreement—it is Monsieur who is so headstrong and

liable to anger. And why? I have been doing my best for the young lady; I have done what I could to protect her——”

“You?” said Frank Gordon, with his eyes glaring again.

“From my brother Demetri——”

“Oh, to the devil with your brother Demetri! Have done with that farce. I want to know if you can bring me those letters the day after to-morrow, at the address I have given you. Understand, I don’t want the school-girl letters; you may keep those—and publish them if you like: I mean the letters written to you—including the one enclosing you money——”

“Monsieur, I will bring every one!” said Argyriades, with an expression of devout sincerity. “Solemnly, on my heart, I declare to you that I will bring every one. You, I know, will be a faithful guardian: in the interests of the young lady herself, to whom could I better entrust them? Then my duty will be done—as mediator—as the protector against Demetri. Only, pardon me, Monsieur the Lord Fragkis—the sum was not precisely agreed upon——”

“I said a fair price,” Gordon reiterated.

“Five hundred pounds, then!” Argyriades said, with an air of finally and satisfactorily closing the bargain; and then, after a few more directions as to how he was

to find his way, these two separated—for the time being.

A couple of days thereafter, and towards three o'clock in the afternoon, a smartly-dressed young gentleman might have been observed loitering about in front of the Red Lion Hotel, Henley. He was a lad of prepossessing appearance—well-featured, fair-skinned, light-haired, and blue-eyed; and if his figure was somewhat short and slight, at least he had an upright carriage and set of the head: indeed, good looks were part of the boy's inheritance, for this was Lord Alec Ross, youngest son of the Duke of Kintyre, and the Kintyre family have been famous for generations for their handsome men and beautiful women. As he strolled up and down, he was idly gazing around him—though there was not much to see; for Henley in winter-time is a dull and deserted place; and on this particular afternoon the cold and pallid sunshine could hardly muster up a gleam on the leaden service of the river; an east wind had brought a faint mist to hang about the wooded heights; while the wide main street, the old stone bridge, and the banks showed hardly anywhere a sign of human life. It was mostly in the direction of the railway station, however, that the yellow-haired lad sent his occasional and expectant glances.

Presently, from that neighbourhood, there hove into sight a young man who, judging by the way he ex

amined the houses as he came along, appeared to be a stranger. In due course he found himself confronted by the sign of the Red Lion, and straightway he made for the door of the hotel. And by some kind of accident the ingenuous-eyed youth who had been loitering about drew near at the same moment.

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur," the latter said, in very excellent French, "but perhaps you have a desire to see Sir Francis Gordon?"

Argyriades did not answer at once. Whether he resented this intrusion, or whether he was disconcerted at being so readily recognised, could not well be gathered from his look.

"I have an appointment—at this hotel——"

"Certainly. Quite right. But Sir Francis wasn't exactly sure as to the moment you might arrive; and he is engrossingly busy in his house-boat—you comprehend?—a house-boat—a house built on a boat; it's only a little way up the river; and he said he would be infinitely obliged to you if you would come along and see him there——"

"But, Monsieur," said Argyriades, rather drawing back, "it was at the hotel I had an appointment——"

"Oh, it's all right," said the young lad—and his clear blue eyes wore an expression of entirely super-human innocence, while his speech was off-hand and matter-of-fact. "The house-boat is a favourite resort of

Sir Francis's—for study, you understand—the University of Oxford is just along this highway here; and then it is convenient sometimes to get away from one's companions, you doubtless agree with me. And now have the goodness to accompany me, Monsieur; we will drop into a boat; and I will pull you up to the island—a few minutes only—I will myself take you to Sir Francis——”

After a second of hesitation Argyriades appeared to overcome his reluctance—or annoyance. He said—

“Thanks, Monsieur, if you will be so kind”—and therewith he allowed himself to be conducted along to the landing-stage, and under direction he got into the stern of a dingy old skiff, while Lord Alec took the oars and proceeded to pull up stream.

And now the Oxford lad, seated opposite his companion, had an excellent opportunity of scanning his appearance; the result of the scrutiny being an inward ejaculation—“I wonder what the Duke would say if he saw me taking this dilapidated dandy out for a row on the Thames!” But the remarks that he addressed to Argyriades himself were of a different character.

“I understand that you come from Greece, Monsieur,” he observed, with airy good-nature. “It is a land which has given the youth of this country a great deal of trouble, particularly in their earlier years; but they don't bear any malice—not at all! Have you

any house-boats on the Eurotas? No?—you surprise me! Any pike-fishing—on the Alpheus, for example? The tastes of Monsieur do not lie in that direction, perhaps. But at least you have bobbed for gold-fish in the Fountain of Arethusa, in among the papyrus stems, you know?—pardon me, I forgot; that is in Sicily. There must be other amusements, however. Have you any foot-ball in Athens?——”

“Balloons, Monsieur?” repeated Argyriades—but suspiciously, for the lad’s girlish blue eyes were almost too artless.

“No, no—foot-ball—the game. The ball is a ball of leather, not of great value; but two sides fight for it, furiously; and then when the fight is over anybody may have the ball—anybody—you, or I, or Tom-Jim-Jack. You know Tom-Jim-Jack, Monsieur? No? Is it possible! He lives by the First of the Fourth, that is, when he is at home, naturally. And so you have not seen the game of foot-ball?—how unfortunate! But at all events you have cricket—the game of cricket that is known to all the world—no doubt you could find an excellent pitch on the Plain of Marathon——”

“Ah, Monsieur!—see!—see!——” cried Argyriades, in greatest alarm, for apparently the bow of the skiff was about to crash into the side of a house-boat that was lying alongside a small and willowy island in mid-stream. But Alec Ross knew what he was about: with

a glance over his shoulder he dug his left oar into the water, shipped his right at the same moment, and the skiff glided quietly under the gunwale of the house-boat, and came to rest. The countenance of the Greek resumed its wonted composure.

It was a strange place for a rendezvous—this forlorn and dismantled house-boat lying in among the pollard trunks and withered herbage of the solitary island; but Lord Alec did not give his companion much time for observation; he hitched the painter of the skiff to the gunwale of the boat, got on board, and invited Argyriades to follow. The Greek, whatever he may have thought, obeyed in silence; his eyes were on the alert, however; and when young Ross, descending a couple of steps into a sort of shallow cockpit, opened a door in front of him and politely asked his guest to enter, the latter paused. And yet there was no sign of any ambush or beguiling; indeed there was no indication of life anywhere; a profound silence reigned; and Argyriades himself had noticed, on drawing near this isolated house-boat, that not a curl of smoke issued from its stove-pipe, though the day was cheerless enough and cold.

“I beg you to proceed, Monsieur,” said young Ross. “It is somewhat dark—but if you step forward—and push aside the curtain——”

Almost at the same moment the curtain was drawn

aside, from within; and there broke upon the Greek's senses a scene well calculated to shake even the firmest nerves. For before him there was a long and barely-furnished apartment, all the windows of which were closed and shuttered; three lamps, suspended from the roof, shed a yellow light; at the head of the table sat a figure wearing a black mask; on each side of the table were two others, similarly disguised; a sixth stood sentry by the arras; while on the board before the conspirators lay a couple of fencing-foils with the buttons off, and a pair of old-fashioned cavalry pistols of formidable aspect. Perhaps Argyriades did not grasp all these details in this one wild second; but at least he perceived that he had been trapped; and instantly he turned to escape—only to find that the yellow-haired youth had shut the door behind him and locked it on the outside. He tugged and struggled desperately—and in vain: then a hand was laid on his shoulder.

“It is useless,” said the masked figure who had been standing by the curtain—which had now been drawn wholly aside.

For a moment Argyriades attempted bravado. He confronted this black-visaged company.

“What is the meaning—of this outrage?” he demanded. “I will appeal to the magistrate——” But here he happened to catch sight of the weapons dis-

played on the table; and his courage seemed to fall away. "Gentlemen," said he, pitifully, "what is your intention? What do you wish with me? What have I done?—"

The person at the head of the board rose in a slow and deliberate manner, and remained standing.

"Attend, sir, and listen to what I have to say," he began; and if his French pronunciation may have left something to be desired, at least he spoke methodically, so that there should be no mistake about his meaning. "Andreas Argyriades," he continued, "we have been informed, and we have reason to believe, that you have been guilty of attempting to extort money by threats, and also of harassing and persecuting a countrywoman of your own, who ought rather to have had a claim on your sympathy. The crime of blackmailing is punishable by English law; but unfortunately, in the case of such offences, justice is done at the expense of the innocent as well as the guilty. You therefore thought you could act with impunity. You erred. We here assembled mean to assist the law, without that publicity which you reckoned to be your safeguard. And yet we do not intend to take advantage of our numbers. You are completely at our mercy, as you must perceive; but you shall have a fair field and no favour; you shall have your choice not only of these weapons but of your antagonist; we only demand that you make reparation

for the evil you have done, and the worse evil that you contemplated——”

The pale face of Argyriades had grown ghastly.

“Gentlemen—sir—I beseech you!” he managed to articulate; and in the extremity of his dismay he appeared to shrink back from those hideous objects lying before him. “It will be murder! I know nothing of these weapons—no—I tell you it will be murder! Gentlemen, I beg of you!—listen to me!—I have an explanation. Gentlemen, I am a friend of the young lady—an old friend of hers—my sister and she were school-fellows. Gentlemen, one of you must be the Lord Fragkis Gordon; he will assure you that I have declared myself her friend, her devoted friend. And now, gentlemen, this is the truth: it was my brother who found these letters; and when I discovered the evil use he wished to make of them, I determined to save the young lady. Gentlemen, it is the truth—on my honour—on the honour of my mother, it is the truth! I determined to save her. I came all the way to England to protect her—for I knew that if my brother showed these letters to anyone, then her reputation would be blasted for ever——”

But at this one of those present—the one nearest Argyriades—sprang to his feet, and tore off his mask, and flung it on the table.

“You damned liar and coward!” said Gordon, with

his eyes blazing; and with the back of his hand he smote the Greek across the mouth. "Will that make you fight, then? I knew you wouldn't face these weapons—they were only put there to scare you—you miserable cur! Here, you fellows," (this in English) "haul his coat off for him—hold him up—haul the beast on to his legs—and I'll give him the wholesomest thrashing he ever had in his born days!"

For by this time Argyriades, beside himself with terror, had literally sunk upon his knees, and with trembling hands he was opening a packet of papers that he had pulled from his pocket.

"See, gentlemen!—see, Lord Fragkis!—I give them to you—every one—and I do not ask for a centime! What more, gentlemen? I give you them—every one—and not a centime—only let me go! Gentlemen, have mercy!—have pity!—and I swear solemnly I will not say a word of this that you have done——"

"Haul the beast on to his legs!" Gordon cried again, furiously.

But the leader of the band came along.

"I say, Gordon," he muttered in English, "you can't fight that fellow—I wouldn't soil my boots with kicking him. See if the papers are all right; and then we'll pitch him into the river, or fling him ashore somehow. Good Lord, I've often heard of blue funk, but

never saw green funk before!—look at him!—green, by Jingo, green!”

Whereupon Gordon got hold of the bundle of letters; and it was those addressed to Argyriades himself that he was most particular about; so far as he could judge by what Briseis had told him, the collection was complete. And then there only remained to bundle this abject wretch out of the boat and into the skiff: he appeared hardly to know what he was doing—fear had paralysed his brain.

“I hope, Monsieur,” said Lord Alec Ross, as he put the oars in the rowlocks, “that your interview with Sir Francis Gordon proved satisfactory. And may one ask where you would like to be landed?”

“To the shore—to the shore—anywhere,” gasped this green-faced creature, whose horror-stricken eyes seemed to be thinking back.

“Because I don’t propose to take you down to Henley, for reasons that I have,” continued Lord Alec. “I would rather, if you don’t object, land you on that other bank there; and—and—well, if you strike across country, you’ll come to a railway-station in time, you know——”

“Anywhere—anywhere that you please,” was the almost inarticulate response.

“You are extremely obliging,” said Lord Alec; and in requital of this courtesy he took some trouble in

choosing a convenient landing-place, so that Argyriades should get ashore without difficulty. The Greek did not look behind him as he left.

A short time thereafter a party of seven young gentlemen had assembled in a private room in the Red Lion. A brake was at the door below, waiting to convey six of them to Oxford; but in the meantime they were refreshing themselves with five-o'clock tea—which consisted of brandy and soda and cigarettes; and there was a great deal of talking and laughing. In the midst of the hubbub one of them happened to glance at an early edition of a London evening paper that the waiter had just brought in.

“Hallo, Gordon,” he cried, “what the dickens is this? Doesn’t this concern you?”

He handed over the pink sheet; and the first headline that caught Frank Gordon’s eye was sufficiently startling—“Attempted Assassination of the Prince of Montevetro.”

CHAPTER IX.

“LOVED I NOT HONOUR MORE.”

REUTER'S telegram briefly narrated how the Prince of Montevetro, walking home on the previous evening from the Club at Sofia to his hotel, in company with the British Diplomatic Agent, had been shot at by some one unknown, but had fortunately escaped, the bullet just grazing his ear. It was a clear moonlight night; and the British Agent, having ascertained that his friend was but slightly wounded, had started off in pursuit of the assailant, who, however, could not be found, though one or two bystanders aided in the search. It was impossible to say whether the outrage was of political origin; but it was well known in Sofia that the Prince of Montevetro had been on intimate terms with the late M. Stambuloff. So far Reuter; and the telegram from the Princess which Frank Gordon found awaiting him on his return to his rooms was even more laconic — “No cause for alarm”; but the letter which in due course followed gave him more ample information.

“It is really most provoking,” the Princess wrote. “You can't imagine how vexed and irritated he has

been by this trifling affair. Not that he was or is frightened—not in the least. I don't believe a Montenegrin is capable of the sensation of fear—unless when he sees somebody about to open a soda-water bottle. But the Prince is *annoyed* and *indignant* beyond measure; it is just as if a small boy had hit him with a pebble—a small boy out of the range of his whip; and this bit of plaster on his ear keeps him in a constant state of fret. Why did we come to Sofia? Why were we in Bulgaria at all? Why couldn't we let other people's affairs alone? Not only that, but because his ear tickles him he has been threatening to abdicate—in favour of his brother George! Think of it!—abdication!—*just now!*—JUST NOW!—when the Great Partitioning is clearly on the horizon. Of course Prince George is a very worthy man; he makes an efficient Commander of the Bodyguard; and he is a good soldier and drill-inspector; but if he were to come well out of the general scrimmage, his very highest ambition would be to get our frontier extended across to Obribazar. Abdication!—just because somebody or something gave him a little clip on the ear; and we are to give up the Great Game that is being played out here just now; and we are to go and rent a place in the Highlands—some place like Glen Skee, I suppose, where Heaven is to be represented by a perpetual stalking of stags. I won't deny that this attempt on his life may have

arisen out of political feeling; for the last time we were in Sofia he made far too open a parade of his acquaintanceship with Stambuloff—playing baccarat every other night with him at the Club, and so on; and all because Stambuloff professed to be interested in the antics of Wiener schnitzel and Gurkensalat. A most imprudent parade; as I warned him at the time; and it is quite possible that some of the fanatic friends of Panitza's may have him down on their list; but to talk of abdication because a bit of sticking-plaster worries the lobe of your ear is really too absurd!

"Besides, even supposing that some crazy lunatic or association of lunatics cherishes a design against the Prince, that can only be through a mistake, and the mistake will be set right directly, when the Prince's true position and probable sympathies will be declared to all Europe. For what do you think is going to happen? You need not proclaim it in the market-place—not at least until the news has got into the St. Petersburg papers—but I learn on very excellent authority that the Czar is about to present to his faithful ally, the Prince of Montevetro, a cargo of munitions of war—hill-guns, rifles, cartridges, dynamite, etc., etc.; and if this significant gift does not keep those Bulgarian Russomaniacs quiet, what can? Instead of taking a chance shot at him from behind a ruined wall, they will be more likely to invite him to become a candidate for the throne of the Prin-

ciality, in the almost certain event of the porridge-pot boiling over one of these days. And to think of going off in a huff to the Highlands of Scotland! Yet S. A. is a self-willed man, just once in a while: from January to December as easy-going a person as ever you met; and then on some 29th of February he puts his foot down—and *le Prince le veult*, with a vengeance! And what, then, if we were to bid a long farewell to all our greatness, and end by settling down somewhere about the Grampians, becoming your neighbours as soon as you have married your ruddy-haired enchantress? I suppose S. A. imagines that deer-stalking and salmon-fishing last all the year round; and that he'll always have the Bourne girls to play Beethoven for him; and Lady Rockminster and Lady Adela to dance Scotch reels in the evening when the men come down from the moor. But no—but no! He is peevish and out of temper just now, merely because a wasp has stung him; and we will not allow him to give up the Great Game because of so trifling a circumstance. And I know him. I know when the first bugle sounds—and sound it will ere long—the old war-horse will answer with his neigh. And it is *not* Prince George who will be consulted about the rectification of frontier lines.”

Frank Gordon had made the waiting for this letter an excuse for delaying his visit to Briseis—that visit of explanation and farewell that he looked forward to with

an immeasurable dread and pain. He had persuaded himself that he must have full details of the attempted assassination; at any moment he might be summoned away to the East; he must remain at his mother's beck and call. But now that he knew all there was to be known, he could no longer shelter himself behind these pretexts. He had to undertake this terribly delicate mission, come what might, though the suffering it would cause he would have heeded less if he could have borne it alone; it was his thought of Briseis that was the origin of this almost insurmountable shrinking and reluctance. If Aunt Jean had but consented to act as intermediary! And then again he argued with himself that Aunt Jean had been of true judgment in this matter; it was the more manly thing for him to go straight to the girl herself; and if she treated him with proud anger and disdain—if she were pitiless—well, that she had a perfect right to do and to be; and he would carry his punishment with him through many and many long years of remembering.

He was a very unhappy lad as he walked up to Devonshire Place; but he experienced some relief on finding that Briseis was not in the drawing-room when he was shown in. Mrs. Elliott was, however; and she rose with effusion—and with some touch of colour in the tired and pathetic face—to welcome her visitor.

"My dear Sir Francis, I was beginning to think we

should never see you again—and then that dreadful affair out there in the East—you cannot tell how upset we all were by the news, and how we have been sympathising with the poor Princess. My bonny darlings were out at afternoon tea when the evening paper was brought in—they are such tender-hearted, unselfish, generous things, and so anxious to help in the charities that dear Lady Hammersley has under her charge—and I assure you there was quite a scene when the announcement was read aloud about the attempted murder: they are so extremely sensitive and sympathetic—their concern about the poor Princess was quite affecting, so I am told. The poor dears had to come home in a cab—though they know well that I expect them to practise the strictest economy; and Brenda especially—she is of such a nervously susceptible nature—she was quite overcome, and lay down on a sofa, and we had to administer port wine again and again before we could get her calmed and soothed. And what are your last tidings of the dear Princess, Sir Francis? I suppose she is completely overwhelmed—such a narrow escape!—such an awful calamity just averted by the finger of Providence—I hope she is bearing up well——”

“Oh, yes, pretty well,” the young man replied. “Indeed she seems to look upon the whole affair as rather a humorous incident. You see, it wasn’t her ear that had a bit taken out of it.”

"And the poor Prince—I do hope he has quite recovered from the shock!"

"I don't know about the shock," he said, "but I do know he is extremely annoyed and angry. And it is no great wonder. He doesn't want to be dragged into all these political imbroglios. He wants to be let alone. He is not a quarrelsome man at all; he likes to amuse himself with his two black poodles; and naturally he resents being flicked on the ear in consequence of other people's disputes. The sooner he gets back to the mountainous security of Montevetro the better."

He had been talking almost at random—with an ever-present consciousness that at any moment the door of this room might open. And if these polite questions and perfunctory answers formed a sort of respite for the time being, he knew that it could not avail for long; nay, he at length grew impatient and desperate; he was forced to interrupt this idle conversation.

"Mrs. Elliott," said he, "may I ask if Miss Valieri is at home?"

"Oh yes," replied the widow, blithely. "Oh yes. She was so very good-natured as to insist on remaining behind, when all the others were going off to Madame Reichenwald's concert; for her cousin, poor boy, is in bed with a bad cold, and he won't have anyone but her to read to him; and she is the dearest creature—

so ready to sacrifice any little pleasure of her own—and so cheerful about it, too——”

“For to tell you the truth I called to see her,” he said, bluntly enough; and then he continued, in a more hesitating manner: “The fact is, I was entrusted with a small commission—perhaps I ought to say I undertook it on my own responsibility; and if you don’t mind, Mrs. Elliott—if it is not an inconvenience to you—I should like to see her for a few moments—by herself, I mean——”

Aunt Clara rose with much good nature.

“I will send her to you at once. But,” she added, as she was leaving, “I must see you before you go, Sir Francis. My darling girls would never forgive me if there were not some proper message of sympathy sent to the poor dear Princess. So *au revoir!*”

For two or three minutes he was left alone in this silent room, in no enviable state of mind. And then the door opened; and here was Briseis—somewhat pale, perhaps, but as beautiful as ever, so overmasteringly beautiful, indeed, that of a sudden his heart cried aloud to him “To me—to me—to me! Take her—enfold her—that is the one woman in all the world!” But the next moment that passionate cry was stilled. He became conscious that the Briseis standing there and confronting him was not the Briseis with whom he had so recently parted—all unstrung and unnerved, piteous,

half-humiliated, appealing. This Briseis was cold, distant, and of a perfect self-command; the calm, straightforward regard she fixed on him was not questioning—nor yet repellent—but only attentive, in a proud kind of way; sweet and serene as she looked—as she could not help looking—she appeared to have become in some strange fashion remote. And a singular thing was that she had not advanced to greet him in the usual manner; perhaps neither he nor she noticed the omission; it was hardly a time for formalities. But this outward impassivity of hers chilled and disconcerted him; this was not Briseis at all; this was a beautiful stranger, distinguished-looking, noble-looking, courteous, complaisant—and ten thousand miles away.

There was no awkward pause of silence; for he had a message to deliver.

"I have brought you the letters Argyriades got possession of," said he, "and I do not think he will trouble you any more."

He took out the packet and placed it on the table. She betrayed neither surprise, nor joy, nor gratitude; but she came forward a step or two.

"Won't you be seated?" she said. "I wish you to read those letters."

He had not expected any such proposal; he looked disappointed and pained.

"Oh, no—no," he said, rather stiffly.

"But I wish it," she rejoined.

"Then I refuse," he said—his forehead flushing.

"I have been told that these letters would compromise my good name if they were shown to anyone," she proceeded, in a deliberate manner, "and I wish to know if that is true."

"And by whom were you told!" he answered her, with scorn. "By a miserable wretch trying to extort money, and ready for any amount of brazen lying. Well, he is not likely to repeat that performance—at least where you are concerned."

Then in somewhat set terms she thanked him for having secured and restored these papers; and she even went the length of asking, in a more or less direct way, whether he had paid anything, and how much, to Argyriades. And Frank Gordon could only say to himself, bitterly enough, that if she chose to shame and insult him, she was within her right in doing so.

"What did I give him?" he said. "I gave him a stroke across the mouth; and he took it submissively. That was all he got; but it appeared to satisfy him; I don't think he will deal in threats and menaces for some time to come. And perhaps I ought to tell you that I did look at some of the letters—those that you wrote to Argyriades—I wanted to see if he had brought all of them back—according to what you told me; and I think you will find they are all there."

"Yes; but there are others: I wish you to read them," she said, coldly.

"Why should you persist in taunting me?" he answered her, in accents of reproach.

"Taunting you?"

"Yes, indeed. You are telling me that I need to be convinced of this or that, with regard to you! And that is what you think of me! Well, the poorest opinion you can have of me is better than I deserve, I know that. I know that——"

All this time he had hardly dared to meet her eyes, so banished from her had he been by the studious dignity and courtesy of her demeanour; and the wild desire there was within him to beg for forgiveness—to beg for friendliness—for anything that would restore something like their former relationship could find no words whatever. His heart was passionately urging him to speak; and yet a kind of hopelessness had overcome him; her manner—her tones—even the poise of her head, that in other days he had so much admired—seemed all too plainly to say to him: "You—you are but as one of the other strangers whom I find surrounding me. You will judge as they will judge. If, then, you have heard anything against my good name, read these letters for yourself; and when you have been convinced, go. Having cleared myself, I have no wish to

continue any further association; and you may return and take your place amongst the crowd."

"Well, yes," he resumed, after a moment, "the poorest opinion you can form of me is no doubt the just one; and if you think that I could be influenced by anything that such a fellow as Argyriades might say—or if you think that I should want to read anything in order to have my faith in you confirmed or re-established—let it be so. Let it be so. But there are one or two points that I should wish to explain, before saying good-bye——"

"Yes, before saying good-bye," she repeated—almost relentlessly, as it appeared to his wrought-up imagination; and the pallor in the perfect and exquisite face, that, too, seemed to speak unmistakeably of a final farewell.

"I gathered, partly from yourself, partly from what Aunt Jean told me, that you had been disturbed—surprised, perhaps I should say—by one or two small things: my remaining away from this house, my not answering your letter for some days, and the like. Well, when you came to me, fancying that perhaps Argyriades had been the cause of this conduct on my part, I told you he had nothing whatever to do with it. But I did not give you the true explanation. And as it is to be good-bye, I should not like you to look back and

believe that I had been guilty of any intentional discourtesy——"

Then he lost his head somewhat.

"Briseis, do you not know—can you not guess—what forced me to give up a friendship that seemed so beautiful a thing, and so harmless to everyone concerned? Do you remember our first meeting—that morning on Dee-side—when you came down alone to the river?—do you remember how easily and simply we got talking together?—it appeared to be so natural that we should know each other. I was free then; my life was not pledged away to anyone; and indeed I was not thinking of such things—though Aunt Jean would have it, when she saw you, that here was my great chance, for she took to you from the very first, and would tell you now that she has never seen anyone like you. But I could not be so presumptuous; and besides, you and I were no more than merely acquainted, even after you had been out to Grantly; and then I went away to the South—and—and other things happened—and my life was no longer my own. But all the same, when I heard you were in London, I wanted to see you; and the oftener we met the further did our slight acquaintanceship grow into a friendship that was about my most valued possession. I saw no harm in it; for I was blind; and the passing hour was too delightful to be sacrificed. But during all this time I was getting to

understand you better and better: you were not merely the beautiful stranger I had met on Dee-side—nor yet the charming visitor who had brought a kind of splendour with her into the dusky old rooms at Grantly; you had become—well, you had become the Briseis that I know now—the Briseis that I shall hold in my heart while I have life.”

He ceased for the moment; and his brows were knit together, as if from some mental pain.

“I did not consider; I was too confident and careless,” he went on. “If I had dreamed of any danger, I should have looked upon my being engaged to marry another woman as a sufficient safeguard. But I did not think; and one fascinating hour followed another; and always I was getting more and more into communion with the winning subtleties of a nature the sweetest and purest that I have known on earth. Oh, do not imagine I seek to excuse myself. All the blame is mine. And there was self-deception too. I deceived myself—I refused to look at consequences—so long as there was another chance of listening to the rustle of your dress on the stair, of seeing you come into the room, of submitting once more to the glamour of your voice and your eyes. And then there came the awakening. It was at a dance—here in this house—you wore yellow roses with your black dress, do you remember?—and that was the night I made the discovery, that I loved

one woman while my honour bound me to another. It was a terrible discovery; but at least I could hope that the punishment for any mischief that had been done would fall on my head alone; and I resolved to withdraw myself—not perhaps all at once, but so that no one should guess what had occurred. Briseis, think as badly of me as you will; I deserve the worst; but—but don't imagine I meant any slight——"

While he was pouring forth these pathetic, blundering, boyish utterances, the face of Briseis had undergone the strangest transformation. Her cold impassivity of look had changed into an eager interest and wonder; and wonder had given place to joy; and joy had found its expression in an ineffable happiness; though, to be sure, before he had come to the end of his story, her eyes—the soft, dark, eloquent eyes—had their conquering beauty all bedimmed with tears. She went quickly towards him. She held out her hand.

"My friend, for ever!" she said—and her grasp was as firm as his own.

The grandeur of her magnanimity—and her unconsciousness of it—amazed him: this was not the disdainful dismissal that he had expected, and that he felt he had earned. Her wet eyes were affectionate and kind; she held his hand for a second or two; and then she strove to put into words some explanation of this sudden change in her attitude towards him.

“Ah, you do not understand, then—you do not understand that the treasure of a woman, all through her life, is the remembrance that the one man she has loved has loved her—yes, for a moment. She may not have what is thought to be happiness; she may not marry the man she loves; but that secret she carries with her, to her dying day—and it is her treasure and her pride. No, no,” she continued, with a sort of wistful smile—and her speech was broken and uncertain, almost to incoherence, “you cannot understand—and I cannot explain. But—but you have given me my treasure to keep—and I am more grateful than I can say: what it would have been if we had parted for ever and no word of revelation! I am content. Dear friend, do not think I am envious of anyone! If—if circumstances seem hard, then it is some other one who is the happier. . . . I wish her well. . . . In time your love will go to her—it is the way of the world—it is right to be so. And you will forget—the Greek girl—to whom you were kind. . . . Good-bye, dear friend—good-bye—God bless you and her——

He caught her in his arms, for he thought she would have fallen.

“Briseis—it is not good-bye!” he said to her, in a low voice—in a voice so intense that her eyes shrank away from him. “It shall not be good-bye! I love you—you love me: is not that enough? It is the highest law——”

She freed herself from his embrace.

"Except honour," she said, with so much of her usual sweet serenity that he stood rebuked and abashed, ashamed of his momentary madness, and despairing of the fetters that bound him. As for her, she was clearly struggling to recall her proud self-command, that had nearly broken down; and yet, as she gave him her hand for the last time, there was the greatest tenderness in her regard; and she suffered him to kiss her on the forehead, in mute token of farewell. Then she went from the room; she had borne herself bravely; whatever of anguish and tragic renunciation may have been in her heart was not for him to see.

And indeed all that afternoon, while she was engaged in her ordinary domestic duties, and in her customary intercourse with Olga and Brenda, with Miss Ada and Miss Carlotta and the rest, she was in no wise cast down; for there still remained some after-glow of the gladness with which she had heard the man she loved confess that he loved her, and perhaps also some lingering trace of that exaltation of feeling with which she had bade him go to redeem his pledged faith. But in the solitude of her own room at night, this high courage fell away from her. The dark was filled with pictures—a succession of scenes; and it seemed to her that her life had been but a series of bereavements; and this last not the least cruel of these. For now she

was altogether alone. One after another had departed from her; and now he who in happier circumstances—such as fell to the lot of other women—might have been her lover, he also was taken from her, through the merciless decrees of fate. And what remained? She contemplated the long years before her with a shuddering dread; she would rather have the end, and that soon. In those black hours of the night—her strength all gone—her pillow wet with tears—she went wearily back, as aforetime, to seek for solace and soothing in the old, familiar lines—

*Over all the mountains
Is peace;
Along the far summits
Hearest thou
Hardly a breath;
The birds are hushed in the forest.
Wait thou only, and soon
Thou also shalt sleep.*

But it was a wider sleep that her aching heart yearned and prayed and sobbed for: a wider and larger sleep: the sleep, sound and beneficent and dreamless, that shall endure through the making and changing and dying of worlds.

CHAPTER X.

"SWEET NELLIE O'REE."

It was about this time that one evening found Miss Georgie Lestrangle and her brother Percy the sole occupants of a private sitting-room in the Waldorf Hotel, New York—a room of considerable size, for the brightly decorated dinner-table was laid for a party of eight. Percy Lestrangle—a young man of irregular features and red hair—was staring contemplatively into the fire; his sister, clad in a sea-going costume of serge, was standing on tiptoe to bring herself on a level with a slab of mirror in the over-mantel, so that she might arrange her neck-tie. The neck-tie was of a dark green and blue tartan, with a slender line of yellow running through it—the Gordon tartan, in fact.

And, as usual, the pretty and pert-nosed damsel was talking away recklessly and at railway speed.

"I do call it a horrid nuisance, this starting off in the middle of the night—don't you? So unnecessary. Why, what's the use of it? I should have thought they'd want all the daylight they could get to steam down the bay—shouldn't you? Never mind. There are com-

pensations. For you do have moments of sense, Percy—haven't you?—and it was just snip-snap of you to think of this little send-off, and getting Madame St. Roche and the rest of us on board all in good humour." She turned from the mantel-piece and looked along the brilliant table, with evident satisfaction. "And I, for one," she remarked, with some significance, "seeing as how strange things may eventuate during the next day or two, I, for one, sha'n't be sorry to have a jolly old tuck-in."

"Really, Georgie," he said, in a peevish manner, "your language is too awful! And why will you keep on asking questions, when you don't expect any answer? It's perfectly maddening! Why can't you state your opinions, without challenging assent—on perfectly immaterial points? Why that perpetual 'don't you?' and 'haven't you?' and——"

"Now, now, Percy, enough of that," she interposed, with an air of authority. "That's all part and parcel of the nervousness and irritability of your break-down; and you undertook you wouldn't give way to it again. And you're not going to quarrel on the very last night of our being together—are you? As if I hadn't enough to worry me! I think it was most inconsiderate of Lady Adela, don't you? To have this wretched book of hers waiting for me, and to expect me to spend my only day in New York in hunting up this Caspar Sprigg, to

woolly-lamb him, and get him to promise a review! It's too bad! Well, I can't now, anyway. You'll have to, Percy—to-morrow or next day, before you go back south."

"Let her look after her own woolly-lambing!" said the convalescent, crossly. "Besides, how am I to find out this fellow?"

"Oh, he's a Professor of something or other," said Miss Georgie, as she took up the *menu* and regarded it with imaginative eyes. "Anglophobia, as likely as not—Caspar Sprigg, Professor of Anglophobia, University of Braggingsville—mightn't that fetch him? I remember the creature—one night at Lady Adela's—hideously ugly—no chin——Oh, I say, Percy, I call this just a ripping spread!" But here there was a noise of newcomers outside; and Miss Georgie, not to be thought a greedy young person, quickly replaced the *menu* on the table, and assumed her most correct deportment.

However, as it turned out, these were not the expected guests; the sounds gradually died away; and then it was that Percy Lestrangle, looking up from his reverie, addressed his sister—with some slight hesitation in his tone:

"I say, Georgie: I have been considering whether I ought to tell you—as a warning beforehand—or whether I should let you find it out for yourself. After all, it's

of no great consequence—you can treat him as a perfect stranger——”

She was not paying much heed. She had picked up the *menu* again; and her eyes seemed to be pleased with the prospect—bouchées à la Montglas—faux-filet au cresson—aubergines à la Provençale, and the like.

“Are you listening?” her brother said. “It may interest you, you know. When I was down at the steamship company’s office this afternoon, I saw the completed list of passengers, and among them—well, you would make the discovery sooner or later—is the name of Jack Cavan——”

The *menu* fell from her fingers, fluttering down to the floor.

“You don’t mean that!” she exclaimed—with dismay in her voice.

“But I do. John Philip Cavan. There’s not the least doubt about it.”

“Then I won’t go!” she said passionately. “I won’t sail in that ship. I won’t submit to this abominable persecution. It’s done deliberately. It isn’t a coincidence—not a bit of it! Of course he knew I was in America; I was perfectly aware of that; but who could have imagined he would be so mean as to plan this voyage! And it’s all a part of the same system. The last time I saw him in a theatre, whenever there was anything insulting said about women, in the piece, he

would turn round and level his opera-glass at me. Oh, the ingenuity of the fiend is perfectly devilish!—there's no other word for it——"

"Well," said her brother, with a languid air, "if young women will go playing games——"

"It's never the men, of course!" she said, contemptuously. "It's never the men who lead them on, and get them into scrapes, of course not! And as for Jack Cavan, he deserved all he got—he was paid out for his temper, and his high-mightiness, and his fine airs: only, if he thinks he's going to persecute me all the way across the Atlantic, he's very much mistaken. I won't go in that ship, Percy. I will forfeit my berth. When does the next steamer of the same line sail?—surely they'll let me change——"

"Oh, what's the good of going on like that!" her brother said, fretfully. "You can't make a fool of yourself before these people—refusing at the last moment. What explanation could you offer?——"

"You could have a relapse," she put in, adroitly.

"Don't talk rubbish. The fact is, you behaved very badly—and now you are in a blue funk. It isn't Jack Cavan that's pursuing you; it's your conscience. And it isn't Jack Cavan, it's your conscience that will haunt you all the way across the Atlantic. How can Jack Cavan harm you? You'll have these half-dozen people surrounding you from morning till night. By the way,

I suppose you told Sir Francis all about that old story?——”

“Tell Frank Gordon?” said she, blushing a rosy-red. “No, I did not. Of course not. Certainly not. There was quite time enough for bygones to be bygones: quite time enough — if only that spiteful fiend would let me alone——” But at this point the door was thrown open; and Miss Georgie’s companions for the voyage did at last make their appearance—Madame St. Roche, Miss Madeline Phayre, Miss Janie Phayre, Miss Romanes, Mr. Algeciras, and Mr. S. F. Quentin of Chicago—all of them, as they came into the room, laughing and talking at once, so excited were they over this little reunion and the larger prospect ahead of them.

Indeed it was the ordinarily vivacious Georgie who alone sat thoughtful and preoccupied—for spaces at least—during this merry banquet: perhaps she was considering the various devices to which she might resort in view of the contingency that had so unexpectedly been sprung upon her. At all events when they did at length drive away down to the dock and get on board the steamer, she was not much in evidence; and when, finally, the great vessel moved away out into the dark—a darkness that was all athrob with lights, red, green, and electric-blue—it was found that Miss Les-trange had disappeared altogether; she had escaped from the usual foregathering in the saloon to the

solitude of her state-room; and as it was surmised that she might be busy opening her cabin-trunks, her friends refrained from disturbing her. And thus it was that Miss Georgie started upon her voyage—with such a night's rest as her not too tender conscience might allow her.

Next morning, when the grey of the dawn was visibly declared in the porthole, she reached up her hand to the top of her berth and pressed a button; and in response to her summons the stewardess appeared—a tall, gaunt, sandy-haired woman with, on occasion, an Irish twinkle in her eyes.

"Oh, stewardess, I'm so ill!" said the young lady, in a panting and most piteous manner. "I'm so dreadfully ill. I didn't ring for you—out of consideration for the others; but I can bear this no longer. What must I take? Tell me what I must take. My brother said champagne, and plenty of it, from the first thing in the morning; but that would be too awful, wouldn't it? Then there's brandy, but that's more horrid still, isn't it? I'm sick enough already; brandy would only 'mak sikker.' That's a joke. That's a Scotch joke. You may think I'm not very ill if I can try to make fun of it; but it's no laughing matter; and I knew all night I should be ill—I dreamt of it——"

"Sure I'm very sorry, Miss," said the stewardess, gravely. "What can I bring for you?"

"Yes, that's just it," she moaned. "I don't know. It's so horrid to be ill, and not to know what to do. And yet, after all, the boat is not pitching so much——"

"Oh, no, Miss!"

"Nor rolling either——"

"No, Miss, and for a very good reason too," said the stewardess. "Sure we're at anchor!"

"What?" exclaimed the invalid, suddenly looking up.

"Yes indeed, Miss; we're anchored in the bay. There's a thick fog."

"And we haven't been to sea at all?"

"Oh, no, Miss; we're not near as far down as Sandy Hook."

For a moment Miss Georgie—thinking back over her apprehensions of the night—looked annoyed and angry; but there was really no use in quarrelling with the sardonic stewardess; so she merely said, with a certain petulance of tone—

"Well, you can bring me a cup of tea and a biscuit. I'm not going into the saloon for breakfast this morning."

Now for how many hours or days, and under what pretexts, Miss Lestrangle might have proposed to herself to remain shut up in her cabin, it is impossible to say—perhaps all the voyage over; but the girl-friends who were travelling with her would not permit anything of that kind; they came swarming into the small state-

room, insisting that she must get dressed and go on deck to see the strange sight. And a strange sight it proved to be--this huge living hive of a vessel cut off from all communication with the rest of the world; or rather there was a sort of communication, of a dim and mysterious kind; for through the opaque, motionless white fog that encompassed them, they could hear voices calling beneath, voices hailing from certain small boats that had crept out from the shore. Nothing could be seen of these visitants or their whereabouts; sometimes their remarks and replies sounded quite close at hand, at other times they were hollow and remote; but whatever advice or information they were tendering, it was universally conceded that until this dense fog lifted there was not the slightest chance of the ship venturing to crawl across the bar.

And meanwhile Miss Georgie, though she pretended to be engrossed in gazing over the side of the vessel, and listening, had been keeping her eyes alert, and that in a tremulous and agitated mood. But no one came near. Perhaps the person she dreaded to meet was having his morning cigar in the smoking-room, or playing Nap with some fellow-passengers. And at length the girls, tired of looking into the mystic white profundity, proposed that they should all adjourn to the music-room; and to this Miss Georgie eagerly assented; she knew she would be safe there, for none of the men-

folk were likely to come to listen to Chopin and Mendelssohn, in the wan light of day.

The hours passed until two bells struck, and then there was an adjournment to the saloon for luncheon. And now it was that the hapless Miss Georgie encountered her enemy—ran full tilt against him at the foot of the companion-way, for her anxious eyes had failed to warn her of his approach. He was a young man of about six- or eight-and-twenty, clean shaven, of sallow complexion, and with a look about his firm and intelligent features as of one who was not likely to suffer much trifling at the hands of a wicked and wilful young lady. As he drew near, he gave no sign of recognition; but he regarded her—with a cold, and pitiless, and indifferent scrutiny; while poor Georgie, frightened out of her senses, and blushing furiously, could only make a wild effort to appear as if she were continuing a conversation with one of her companions—

“Oh, serge, did you say?—blue serge?—yes, I quite agree with you—there’s nothing so neat and serviceable—I always use it myself, though my things shab so quickly on board ship—and I’m too poor to bring trunk-fulls of dresses with me——”

He was gone—and she drew a long breath to still her galloping heart; and then again when they had entered the saloon and taken their places, she found to

her immense relief he was seated so far away from them that she had not so much to fear from his relentless eyes. And fortunately not one of her friends had noticed her confusion and alarm.

Well, the fog lasted all that day, and all the next, and the next—three days and nights the great steamer remained in that strange white isolation; and although certain critics—mostly commercial travellers in the smoking-room—grumbled and alleged that the captain might have got out if he had shown a little more daring, the bulk of the passengers resigned themselves to their fate, and contrived to pass the time somehow by dint of various amusements. The ladies who had first obtained possession of the piano were practically allowed to retain a monopoly of it; and this boudoir-like apartment formed a snug and happy retreat; in especial was Miss Georgie glad to find safety there—for reasons she did not choose to reveal.

But on the morning of the second day of the fog, Miss Janie Phayre came along to Miss Lestrangle's cabin.

"I say, Georgina," she observed—for only so far had their intimacy progressed—"do you know anything of this? I have just found it amongst my music; and I am perfectly certain it was not there last night. It must have been put there this morning, sure. And yet it's not for me—these are not my initials——"

Miss Georgie was leisurely finishing her toilet; but she turned, and perceived that her visitor was holding in her hand a sheet of paper, that had a couple of verses written on it in pencil. When she took the proffered page she started slightly, as if recognising the writing; then as her glance followed down these lines, her vague surprise gave way to a very different emotion: her cheeks and forehead were flushed red, and her eyes were indignant and angry. For this was the taunting rhyme that she found “respectfully dedicated to Miss G. L.”:

*I gave you my life, what more could I do,
And you swore and you swore you would ever be true;
But summer is short; the leaf falls from the tree;
And women are changeable, Nellie O'Ree!*

*And do I upbraid you?—oh no, and oh no;
The world is the world; and things will go so.
And you need not recall, 'mid your laughter and glee,
That you broke a man's heart, sweet Nellie O'Ree!*

“Do I know what it means?” she said, hotly. “Yes, of course I do! The insolence of it!—the insolence!—”

She tore the paper into four pieces, and crushed them together and flung them wrathfully on the floor.

“Oh, what is it, dear Georgina!” her astonished visitor cried, in instant curiosity. “Is there anything going on on board?—what is it?—do tell!”

"There's an impertinent man on board, that's about all!" said Miss Georgina, scornfully. "Is that anything new? You'll meet with plenty of them before you're much older. But I would rather not say any more."

She sate herself down on the couch, her eyes still burning; and as it was clear that she did not wish to give any explanation, Miss Janie, after a brief farewell message, withdrew—no doubt hoping to hear something further of this mystery later on. The moment she had left, Miss Lestrangle picked up the crumpled ball of paper. She unrolled it and pieced together the fragments. She read down, carefully and thoughtfully, the touching little ballad of "Nelly O'Ree"; and then for a short while she let it lie in her lap; and then she proceeded to tear the fragments into still smaller fragments, and these she scattered out at the open port. When finally she was ready to leave her cabin, there was a look of very definite resolution on her face.

She did not go to the music-room, or anywhere near it. She went straight up on deck, her eyes outstripping her in their peremptory search. And she soon found what she sought: Mr. Jack Cavan was taking his morning promenade, alone as it chanced, and muffled up in a capacious ulster, for the mist was raw and cold.

Without a second of hesitation she went directly towards him; and he, perceiving that she did not mean to let him pass, stopped short.

"How dared you put that thing among the music—how dared you!" she demanded, with a flaming glance.

He turned very pale, even to the lips. But he did not flinch.

"I wished you to see it," he said, deliberately.

"Yes, and the others!" she retorted. "And the others too, of course! You wished them to see it too, no doubt! It was for them to draw their own conclusions from its—from its—from its untruth!" She paused, to get her breath—or perhaps not knowing how to express the vehemence of her anger. And then she blurted out: "Well, thank goodness I know someone would not do such a thing!"

This appeared to sting him; for after all he was but mortal.

"The raw-boned Scotchman, I presume!"

"Frank Gordon is the handsomest boy that ever came to London," said she, warmly. "And what's more, he has the manliness to be forgiving. I say he has the manliness to be generous and forgiving. He's the kind of man who would forgive anything to a woman——"

"That is a convenient kind," he remarked, with an air of disdain.

"—if he cared enough for her," she went on. "Yes. If he cared enough for her, he would show him-

self manly and forgiving—not—not revengeful and insulting.—"

She stopped again.

"Have you anything further to say, Miss Lestrangle?" he asked.

"No, I have not!"

"Then I will bid you good-morning," he said, respectfully enough, and he raised his hat, and walked away.

Miss Georgie went down below. At the foot of the companion she lingered for a second, to apply her handkerchief to her eyes. Then bold and erect of head she marched down the length of the saloon, and entered the music-room, where the usual little coterie was assembled around the piano.

"Georgina, dear," cried the elder of the Phayre girls, "what is all this about a mysterious piece of poetry?"

"A piece of poetry?—a piece of trash!" replied Miss Georgie, with scorn. "I threw it out of the window. Oh, there's no secret about it," she continued, loftily, as she found that these curious maidens were regarding her. "None. Why should there be? No secret whatever. There is a gentleman on board whom I once—once knew a little; and—and—he took this way of recalling himself to my recollection. Stupid, wasn't it? He might just as well have come frankly up and spoken, mightn't he? I call it a stupid trick. But

you needn't speak of poetry—poetry!—a silly little Irish song—of no consequence whatever. At least I suppose it was Irish—I forget—I threw it out of the window. He's Irish himself, of course. That explains his writing verses. There's not an Irishman born that doesn't think he can write verses and throw a salmon-fly better than anybody else in the world. Only, I wish they wouldn't bother one with their silly songs!"

So that was the end of the episode, for the present—though one or two of Miss Georgie's companions may at odd hours have ruminated over this obscure transaction, and speculated. However, after the weary days and nights of waiting, the great ship-full of folk at length discovered that they were to be released from their chill imprisonment; the welcome throb of the screw was felt once more; they began to creep down towards Sandy Hook, and in due course of time got out into the open Atlantic. Not only that, but they found themselves sailing into the most lovely weather—calm seas and cloudless skies—blue above and a shining blue all around; and this delightful transformation seemed to produce a corresponding change in the spirits of everybody on board. Whither had fled the grumblers? There was a universal kindliness and cheerfulness and goodwill; confidence in the captain was entirely restored; the passengers said nice things

about each other—knowing they would be repeated; rope-quoits and shovel-board were started; and of course the music-room was quite abandoned, for who could remain away from the charming promenades on deck, in the bracing air and sunlight? And perhaps the general amiability had got into Miss Georgie's heart; or perhaps the having continually to avoid Jack Cavan on these marchings up and down was beginning to prey on her nerves; at all events, finding him on one occasion alone, she again went up to speak to him. As before, he was all attention—and as frigid as ice.

"Couldn't we," said she, valiantly, "couldn't we agree to be friends, for the voyage over at least?"

He regarded her for a moment, and said quite gravely—

"Yes, if you wish it."

"Oh, if that is the way," said she, proudly, "—no, thanks!" And at once and haughtily she returned to her friends.

There came a night: a full moon was sailing through the tranquil heavens, and on the slumbering and slowly-moving waters there lay a pathway of silver, widening here and narrowing there, until it reached the immeasurable and unknown horizon. It was late, and yet a number of people had preferred this magical white scene to the golden comfort of the saloon; and

Madame St. Roche was a lenient chaperon; she and her little party were all on deck, huddled cosily together, chatting the one to the other, or gazing contemplatively out on the entrancing beauty of sea and sky. And now it was that there stole into the silence—for the continuous lapping of the waves and the familiar throb of the engines formed almost a silence—there stole into the silence a sound so sweet, so clear, so distant that it seemed to come from nowhere at all, it seemed rather like the echo of a flute heard in some remote and mystic fairyland that one has visited in a half-forgotten dream.

“Oh, isn’t it too beautiful!” murmured one of the girls.

“It’s a cornet,” said one of the gentlemen: “but where the dickens is the player?—is he some Ariel in the rigging, or flying in the wake of the boat?”

“That darling Purser—he has planned this for us,” said another of the girls.

“Hush—hush!” said the most sensible of the group.

And well indeed they might listen to this soft and silver-toned strain that had for its accompaniment the half-heard whisper and rush of the moonlit waves. It was an Irish air—it was “Farewell, but if ever you welcome the hour”—and it was exquisitely played: no wonder they listened. But meanwhile something had

happened to Georgie Lestrangle. She was seated next Madame St. Roche; and the moment the clear notes of the cornet began to steal through the witchery of the night, the elder lady felt the girl grasp her arm. It was an involuntary action, probably; anyhow the hand remained there, fixed and trembling; and the figure of the girl was trembling too. Nay, as Madame furtively perceived, tears were running down her cheeks; and as her agitation grew greater and greater, it was clear she could stay here no longer. She tried to slink away unobserved—with uncertain gait and head bent down. Not a word was said by any of her companions—perhaps in the dusk they had not noticed; but Madame rose and swiftly and discreetly followed.

She tapped at the door of the cabin, and got no answer; but she heard a sound as of wild sobbing; and so she made bold to enter. She found the unhappy girl in a perfect passion of crying; she lay at full length on the couch, her face downward; and in the agony of her grief her hands were clenched into the cushion, while her whole frame quivered and shook.

"Georgina, dear!"

"Oh, my God, it's too cruel—it's too cruel!" she moaned, in the intervals of her frantic sobbing. "I cannot bear it—I cannot suffer this torture any more—he wants to break my heart—and I think he has done that now. Ah, Madame St. Roche, you do not know—

you do not know—that was the air he used to play for me when we were at Glengariff—it was his last good-night to me—every night when I had gone into the hotel—and he was out in the bay—and then when my people wouldn't let him come to see me—that was at Wicklow—after the quarrel—he used to play those Irish airs—and they were a message from him to me—oh, it's too cruel!—it's too cruel!—but—but he has had his revenge sure enough—oh, yes,—sure enough—for I will never reach Queenstown alive——”

“Merciful Heaven, what do you say!” cried Madame, and she drew in a chair to the couch, and released one of the girl's hands and held it.

“No, I will not!” she sobbed again. “I will not. I have made up my mind. Long before we get to Queenstown—there will be an end—and he will have his revenge sure enough——” But here she burst into another flood of tears that for a time completely stopped all utterance.

“My child, you are mad!” exclaimed Madame. “I see all the situation of affairs—it is not revenge—it is to win you back to him that he plays the beautiful air—it is to recall tender scenes——”

“It is not—it is not!” she said, passionately. “It is to taunt me—to reproach me—to accuse me: it is for revenge. And—and—Madame—what more revenge can he want? The moment I set eyes on him—on

board this ship—I knew that I had thrown my life away. You see—you see—I have been absent from England for a time—and able to look at things—and then—then when I saw him—all the old time came back—even though I was mad-angry with him—or he with me—I don't care which—and then—then he goes and plays this air—knowing it would just cut my heart in two———"

"Yes, yes, child," said Madame; "and he made a very effective appeal to you, as anyone can see; and it will all come right——"

"Come right?" she repeated, and she struggled upwards from her recumbent position, and sat there dejected and hopeless, making some effort to get the tears away from her cheeks and eyes. "Come right?—yes—when I throw myself overboard—then it will come right—and he will have his revenge at last. That will be the end—and there will be no need—of any more reproaches——"

And so they continued the argument, the one comforting, the other despairing; until finally Madame persuaded her young charge to go to bed, to see if the night might not bring rest to her suffering soul.

Next morning Miss Georgie did not make her usual appearance on deck, nor was she present at luncheon. In the afternoon, a gentleman hitherto unknown to her,

came up to Madame St. Roche, and said he hoped that Miss Lestrangle was not unwell.

"She is rather ailing to-day," was the reply.

"Will you be so kind as to tell her that I am exceedingly sorry to hear it?" said he. "My name is Cavan."

Madame (with rapid thoughts of her own) immediately took the message below. Miss Georgie was lying on the couch in her state-room, partly dressed, with plenty of rugs thrown over her; and very listless and languid she looked after the long night's sleepless suffering. However, when she heard what Madame had to tell, she roused herself somewhat.

"But how did he say it, madame?—that is the point. Formally, of course. A mere formal message, that is all. An ordinary piece of politeness——"

"Ah, no, not at all," said Madame; "it was most friendly and sincere. My child, I fear you have been hard towards that young man."

"Hard?" the poor invalid repeated bitterly. "Hard? You may think so—but you don't know *him*!"

After a little while she said—

"Madame St. Roche, do you ever go up the staircase leading from the fore-saloon?—there is an archway at the head of it where there are seats for two or three—would you mind sending the stewardess to see if that corner is vacant?—and if it is she might ask

Mr. Quentin or Mr. Algeciras, either of them, to come down and lend me an arm: I could be ready in a few minutes, and it would be more interesting than lying here."

All which was duly done; and Miss Georgie found herself ensconced in this sheltered spot, whence she could look out on the deck and the rigging if she was so disposed. But she was not yet satisfied.

"Mr. Quentin," she said to her escort, "do you know a Mr. Cavan who is on board?"

"By sight only."

"I wish you would go and tell him, please, that I want to see him."

A few moments brought Jack Cavan to her side, while the sensible Quentin, remembering a familiar adage, made some sort of excuse and disappeared.

"Sit down, Jack," said she, in a softened and troubled voice, "I want to speak to you."

Obediently he took his place by her, and these two were now the only occupants of this shadowed recess, with but little fear of interruption.

"Jack, I want to ask for your forgiveness," she said, "and if you refuse, you'll be sorry some day, and perhaps sooner than you think. Haven't you had enough of revenge? I know now that I have made a wreck of my life—isn't that enough revenge for you?"

"I don't want revenge," said he, bluntly. "I want you, Georgie."

"Ah, but that's all past and gone," she answered him, in a sad and resigned fashion. "When you've made your bed you must lie on it. That's all over now. You shouldn't have quarrelled."

"It was you who quarrelled—you and your people——"

"Ah, well, you need not bring all that back again," she said, with a bit of a sigh. "It's all over and done with now. But oh, Jack, Jack, what made you play that song of Moore's last night?—It recalled all the old times—the old times—the old times——"

She began to cry a little; but presently she dried her eyes again.

"If you had a scrap of courage, Georgie," said he, "we might easily bring back those old times to both of us."

"What do you mean?" she said, suddenly looking up: then her eyes fell. "Oh, yes, I know. I know what you mean. But I couldn't. Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't! He's such a dear fellow—and it would be so dishonourable——"

"It would not be dishonourable at all," he said boldly. "It would be quite the reverse. I suspected you hadn't forgotten the old times, Georgie—oh, didn't I know it quite well! And if I have vexed you and angered you, then you must forgive me: it's you that must forgive. And you needn't talk about anything

dishonourable: after what you have just said, it's the only honourable thing you can do, by him, and by me, and by yourself——"

"Oh, Jack, it's just dreadful to say it—so mean and contemptible—I feel so thoroughly mean and contemptible—but—but—do you think he would let me off?"

"I take it, he is a gentleman!" her companion exclaimed. "He wouldn't force a girl into marrying him that doesn't want to marry him. Besides, when he hears the whole story, he will see that I have the prior claim. I have the first claim on you——"

"Oh, Jack, I couldn't do it!" she still protested. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't face him. Think of his coming to meet me at Liverpool—how could I face him? He's so frank and straightforward himself—and I should feel so deceitful and sneakish and despicable——"

"Nothing of the sort!" he maintained, vehemently, "I tell you it's the straight thing to do. Georgie," he went on, in a more insidious manner, "will you leave it all to me? Will you let me arrange it? Will you leave it all in my hands?"

"Y—yes, Jack—if you think you can——"

What now occurred took place in a recess, as before described, at the top of the fore-saloon companion, which was rarely used at this time of the day, while

any passer-by going along the deck would hardly think of peering into this obscure retreat. So that there was no tale to tell throughout the ship—or to be set down here. When Miss Georgie next spoke it was in a soft and purring and happy fashion—and singularly blithe seemed this poor invalid wrapped up in the fur cloak Lady Adela had given her.

“You see, Jack, it was this way—now I’ll tell you honestly how it all happened in the Highlands—for I’ve as good a right as anyone to make excuses, haven’t I?—and you wouldn’t condemn me unheard, would you? It was like this, you see—you see, it was like this—well, perhaps it’s not so easy to explain——”

“Don’t explain anything, Georgie,” said he, with a certain grimness. “I know your ways.”

“Ah, now you want to quarrel again!” she retorted instantly. “And you don’t appear to care a straw whether I come back to you with a clear and white conscience—as I could prove to you if you’d only listen. Now, Jack, do listen! It was like this, you see. He and I were the youngest of the house-party up at Glen Skean Castle, you know; and naturally we chummed; and he was awfully nice, and kind, and forgiving—not like some people. And of course there was a little skylarking; only he was as bad as I was—I declare to you he was as bad as I was; he used to take me away for long excursions with him; and he would dry my back hair

when it got wet with the rain, and pin it up again; or he would bathe my wrists with eau-de Cologne when they were bitten with the midges; and he made me drink out of the same glass with him—like a couple of children—like Paul and Virginia; and he cut off some of my hair to make salmon-flies with. And tricks of that kind. You see how honest I am. Any other girl would conceal all that nonsense. And then it got rather more serious—not really serious, you know, but there was a kind of appearance of seriousness about it, don't you understand—and my head got all bewildered, what with the moorlands, and the mists, and the red deer, and the wild nights among the hills—and—and, in short, we blundered into an engagement. What made me do it, I cannot imagine. But I thought you were a brute—in fact, I knew it—and I know it now; and he is just the nicest boy that ever was born, and that's what he is. You won't mind my saying that, will you? You wouldn't be scudgy and mean and jealous, seeing what has happened? And he was such a dear boy, and so good-natured, and handsome, and ready for any mad mischief that you might put into his head—I mean, that might come into his head. And then, Jack, you must remember this: I have never thought much of myself, or put any value on myself; but I might have been Lady Gordon of Grantly, and the daughter-in-law of a Princess as well. Only, Jack—

only—I will confess it—it would have been with a broken heart. I knew that the moment I set eyes on you on board this ship. Then I knew what I had done. And I was in such despair that I told Madame St. Roche I would throw myself into the sea before ever we should reach Queenstown. Perhaps I didn't quite mean it, but I was pretty miserable all the same——”

“Georgie,” he said, interrupting her for a moment, and speaking rather gravely, “don't make any mistake: I understand well enough that you are giving up a good deal.”

“Ah, but I've got you, Jack!—oh, darling Jack, I've got you! And what would anything else be to me, if I had to go through life with a broken heart?” She paused for a second, and then resumed, in a somewhat altered key: “At the same time, Jack, I shouldn't like Frank Gordon to think that I had thrown myself away, as they call it. I don't want him to consider me a sentimental idiot. There wasn't much of that kind of nonsense betwixt him and me; and I shouldn't like to have him laugh at me now. I'm not moonstruck, am I? I'm not a lunatic?—though it is awfully nice to be sitting close and snug beside you, Jack. And this is what I meant to say—though it's rather horrid—since you are going to explain matters to him, if you could bring in some little mention of Kilcrana Abbey—then—then he might understand I wasn't a stage-struck

school-girl. Of course it's horrid to talk of such things. I know it's horrid. And I do honestly believe, Jack, that if you had been a poor man, I could have sacrificed everything for your sake—but it's better as it is, I dare say. And oh, dear Jack, if you should really think there's been the least bit of sacrifice—the least tiny little bit of a sacrifice—I'm sure you'll remember it to me, and be kind to me, and pet me—for you know well enough you've got a brute of a temper——"

It was at this moment—the afternoon having drawn to dusk—that the electric lights flashed into existence all around them. She sprang to her feet, very nimbly for an invalid.

"My gracious, what will Madame think of me! Jack, you must come and be introduced to my friends, some time before dinner. Can you tell lies?"

"I can try."

"How many could you muster, do you think?"

"About fifteen thousand."

"It'll take about all that to explain the situation to these people. So go away and think. I will say nothing till I hear from you. Good-bye!"

"Au revoir!" said he; and their parting was most discreet, for they were afraid of that blue-white electric glare.

And again that night the moon shone gloriously, this time riding through long and fleecy streaks of

cloud; and Madame St. Roche proved to be the most sympathetic of chaperons; and Jack Cavan had discovered another secluded nook that the constructor of the vessel would seem to have specially designed for a pair of happy lovers. They were sitting together, these two; and they had a great deal to say to each other, serious or the reverse of serious, with regard to the future; but of a sudden Miss Georgie broke in with a low, smothered croon of delight—

“Oh, Jack, kiss me again, and tell me it’s all true!”

CHAPTER XI.

“SEEMED ATHENS AS A PARADISE.”

ATHENS lay under snow — snow trampled and brownish-yellow in the main thoroughfares, but a wonder and a splendour far up among the lonely pillars of the Acropolis, and still further away, along the shoulders of Hymettus, a solid white against the deep pellucid blue. Down here in the city, the air was still, and clear, and bitterly cold; the passers-by looked miserable, and the scraggy little horses shivered; while the occasional wearer of a fustanella appeared to be conscious that the garment was entirely out of keeping with this kind of climate. But in the *salle-à-manger* of the Hotel of the Tower of the Winds, in the Palace Square, there was another tale to tell; the long and lofty apartment had been well warmed by the stoves; and indeed the two travellers who had just taken their places at the central table found themselves in comfortable case; for at this hour there were no other guests, the assiduous waiter was displaying before them a most excellent lunch, while the proprietor himself was opening for them a bottle of Santorin.

“Well, Aunt Jean, you’ve done me many a good turn,” said the younger of the two—who seemed restless and preoccupied, and would hardly look at the food set before him—“but never one like this: the long railway journey—in midwinter——”

“Toots, toots, laddie,” said Jean Gordon, with her usual good-humour—and she at least paid sufficient attention to the cutlets and macaroni—“it’s been nothing but a bit jaunt! And it’s not for Aberdeenshire folk to complain of a whaff of snow——”

“There was no one else I could ask for advice or help,” he went on. “You are so wise, and shrewd, and kindly; and then you have her confidence already; she won’t be frightened when she sees you—if you can get to see her. But the whole situation is so desperately difficult. You know how proud she is—proud and sensitive. And if I had come away out here by myself, and gone direct to her, her whole nature would have been up in revolt against the assumption—the assumption—well, that she was to be had for the asking. She would have shut herself up still more completely——”

“The foolish creature,” put in Aunt Jean, “to run away and hide herself in this fashion!”

“As for that,” said he, “I can easily understand her desire to get away from England; she had not been too well treated there; and I suppose she thought she

would seek a refuge with the people amongst whom she had been brought up. And I dare say she wanted to leave everything behind her, and cut off all communication with what was bygone. But if there was any intention to keep her whereabouts a secret, then my blessings on that pudding-faced Olga Elliott for blurt-ing it out! Of course it was spite that prompted her. 'A maid-servant!' says she. 'Gone to be a maid-servant in an asylum for orphan girls in Athens!' And then I knew in a moment! I knew in a moment! Why, dozens of times I had heard Briseis talk of that institution, and of the Patronne being an old friend of hers, and of the extraordinary beauty of many of the young girls there. That was how it first came about—that was how she first spoke of it: she was telling me that anyone arriving in Athens as a stranger, and expecting to see the creations of Phidias or Praxiteles walking along Hermes Street, would be awfully disappointed with the look of the people—the women in especial; but on the other hand, she said, many of the young girls were just divinely beautiful creatures; and then she told me all about this institution, and about her often going up at the play-hour to have a romp with the grave-eyed small goddesses. 'Oh,' says I to myself, the moment Olga Elliott blundered out with the truth, 'we're all right now—if only Aunt Jean will come along and be the wise counsellor.' But the fearful long

railway journey—and the crossing from Brindisi to Patras in midwinter——”

“Get on with your lunch, man!” said Aunt Jean. “And I wish you’d see if they cannot get some seltzer-water with just a bit of a sparkle in it: this is as dead as last Hallowe’en.”

“Here, garçon!” he boldly called to the waiter. “Ça ne marche pas — cherchez une bouteille qui marche!”

“Ye see, Frankie, lad, I’m rather fidgeting to get through,” said Miss Jean, in an undertone, “and I’ll tell you the reason, though maybe I shouldn’t. Do you remember a young officer coming up to speak to me in the railway station at Brindisi?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, that was an aide-de-camp of Prince George’s. And he had come all the way across from Montevetro on a special mission; and while you were looking after the luggage he explained the matter to me, and gave me a small box addressed to you, and a letter from your mother addressed to a certain young lady; and in the event of everything going right, I was to deliver both. But bless ye, laddie, how can I sit still and eat in peace while that casket is in my dressing-bag—upstairs in my room—in a foreign hotel?—I’m just on tenterhooks till I get it handed over. The young brigand

with the great moustache and the glaring eyes warned me of its value——"

"It's a pity you shouldn't have your luncheon in comfort, Aunt Jean," said he, humanely. "Shall I go and fetch down your bag, and you can have it put on a chair, and keep it under your own eyes all the time——"

"The very thing!" said Aunt Jean. "Away ye go. Number eight is my room, and the bag is up at the window."

In due course the dressing-bag was brought down and placed on the chair at her side; but still Miss Jean was not satisfied; perhaps some natural feminine curiosity had to be taken into account.

"What I can well understand," she said, "is that your mother and the Prince might wish to send the young lady a little present, as a kind of congratulation on her engagement—if engagement there is to be; but what I cannot understand is why, seeing they are in Vienna, they should not send it from there—Vienna, the very place for such things! But to put all this trouble on Prince George, and have that moustachioed brigand come across from Montevetro, at this time of year, when the mountains are usually snowed up—Frank," she said on a sudden impulse, "I'm going to give ye the casket now: I'm going to take it for granted that all will be well——"

“Aunt Jean,” he remonstrated, almost despairingly, “if you take anything for granted you will ruin everything! You don’t seem to know with whom you have to deal. Briseis Valieri may look very serene in manner and self-possessed, but she’s as easily startled as a fawn, and sensitive beyond expression. I tell you, you must assume nothing! We are travelling for pleasure—we came here by accident—oh, any excuse you like!—but for goodness’ sake don’t make it appear as though you had come right away from England to capture her and carry her off. If you knew how proud she is—and—and—apprehensive——”

“Leave her to me, laddie,” and the shrewd Miss Jean; and then, not to be balked of her little gratification, she unlocked her dressing-bag, and got hold of the casket, and handed it over. “Take off the wrappers, and let me see.”

It was worth inspection: even the cover of it—the lid of the casket—with its dark-green transparent enamel ornamented with filigree-work of faded gold, was a piece of exquisite art; but when he took out the enclosed treasure—a bracelet it was, of Byzantine design, of elaborate and intricate craftsmanship, and all encrusted with uncut precious stones—Jean Gordon’s covetous eyes were staring.

“I’ll wager that’s from the family jewels!” she exclaimed. “And that’s why it came over from Monte-

veltro. Frank, lad," she added, significantly, "your mother didn't persuade the Prince to send you anything of that kind when she heard of your first engagement. There was not so much approval then."

"Poor Georgie!" said he, half-laughing. "She was about dead with terror when she landed at Liverpool—and just wild with gratitude when she found I wasn't going to cut her throat for jilting me."

"Now will ye sit down in quiet and let a body finish her luncheon decently," said Miss Jean; and he did as he was bid; whereupon she proceeded with the pastry, and fruit, and sips of Santorin; but she kept on talking all the same. "I'm not to assume anything? Very well. But I know what your mother has in her mind—that you should take your bride to Vienna, and spend the remainder of the winter there with them, before they go back to the Principality. And a sensible plan too. Dee-side is bleak at the beginning of the year. Better wait till the primroses and the hyacinths come out in the woods: that's the time to show the young wife her new home. And ye'll not find me there. I declare to you ye'll not find me there——"

"We'll see about that, Aunt Jean," said he—himself trapped into an assumption.

"Na, na; I've been long enough prisoned up in that tower, and never a knight of them coming prancing on his steed, and blowing his bugle, to release me,

I'll be off to Edinburgh. There's the Leslies, and the Kirkpatricks, and the Ramsays—plenty of company; and although they used to say 'dinna misca' a Gordon in the raws of Strathbogie,' there will be quite enough consideration for a Gordon of Grantly a wee bit farther south than Strathbogie. And then I'll be seeing you from time to time, Frankie, to notice if marriage has made any change. Sometimes it does, mind. I'm sure you've heard of that roystering, blustering, blethering idiot, Maceachran—the savagest pulpit-thumper in the north of Scotland—he's like Fin Mac Cowle,

“That dang the devil, and gart him yowle” *

—and he keeps his wife, and his family, and his elders, and his congregation just in trembling subjection to his thrawn temper and his down-drawn mouth. Dear me, I remember him when he first came to Sanchory—a pale, whitey-faced divinity-student, as gentle as a pet-lamb, and as shy as a school-miss——”

“And has that fearful change been produced by marriage?” her nephew asked of her.

“No; I rather think it's been original sin developing,” said Aunt Jean, thoughtfully. Then of a sudden she looked up. “And now, Frankie, before I set out, give me complete instructions.”

“Not I,” he answered her. “I can trust you, Aunt

* That beat the devil, and made him howl.

Jean. You always say and do just the right thing at the right moment——"

"Very well, then: the one point settled is that if I can find the runaway, I am to ask her to dine with us this evening. And we are merely two distinguished travellers, passing through Athens—is that the proposition?"

"I leave it all to you, Aunt Jean," he said, nervously and anxiously.

"Frankie, lad, your simulations won't be the least bit of good. She'll suspect something, the instant she sees me——"

"I leave it all to you, Aunt Jean," he maintained, doggedly.

"And while I am racing and chasing about this unknown town, what are you going to do with yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said, absently, "I suppose I may as well climb away up to the top of the Acropolis, to have a general look round. Perhaps I may get a glimpse of the island of Aegina—that was Briseis's home, you know, when she was quite a young girl."

"Well, I suppose the sooner I'm off the better," said Miss Jean, rising from her chair. "And while I'm getting ready you ought to go and lock up that precious casket in your portmanteau: I'm glad it's out of my charge."

A short time thereafter a carriage was drawn up in front of the hotel, and Frank Gordon was pacing to and fro at the foot of the staircase, waiting for Miss Jean to come down. When she did appear, she was buttoning a pair of furred gloves.

“‘Oh little did my mither think,’ ”

she said, as she drew near,

“‘That day she cradled me,
What lands I was to travel ower’

—and the idea of my adventuring into this strange place—all by myself—what is to become of me?——”

“Oh, you’ll be all right: you’ve got a good French tongue in your head, Aunt Jean,” he said, encouragingly. “Everyone knows that. With all her experience of Courts, the Mater doesn’t speak French near as well as you do, and with such a perfect accent——”

“It’s you that are the fine judge, Frankie!” she said, mocking at him; and then she stepped across the swept pavement, and took her place in the carriage, and nodded good-bye to him, and was driven off.

And as they went swiftly and noiselessly through the muffled streets, Jean Gordon had very little attention to bestow on what she was passing. She knew that this was a much more delicate and difficult mission than she had been willing to confess; and it was not on everyone’s behalf she would have undertaken it;

but there was little she would not do for her beloved nephew Frank. In any case, she had now little time for plans and preparations; the distance was not great; and just as she had made up her mind that she must trust mainly to luck, the carriage was pulled up in front of the institution she was in quest of—a large building with something of architectural pretensions, situated in a quiet and rather outlying part of the city.

She let herself down from the vehicle, and stepped across the pavement to the gate; and there she stood stock-still, for through the railings she beheld a scene that had a sudden and unexpected interest for her. The entrance to the institution was not in front, but at the side, and some way along; and around this sheltered door-way, and in a little bit of a verandah adjoining, were scattered groups of young girls—from seven to fourteen or fifteen their ages might be—who were engaged, rather timidly and in a kind of unwonted fashion, in picking up handfuls of snow and flinging them, with little cries of exultation, at a solitary figure out in the open. Something seemed to catch in Jean Gordon's throat. For the figure was that of a young woman, tall, and slim, and of a wonderful, agile grace; and from among the stunted and leafless trees in the strip of garden she also was picking up handfuls of snow and hurling them back at her enemies—one

against thirty was the unequal contest; and she was laughing merrily—so merrily that every now and again, through her parted lips, the sunshine gleamed on her perfect teeth. Moreover, the reflected light from the snow had robbed her face of its natural shadows, so that there was a kind of glorification there; and the brisk exercise had brought a rose-leaf tinge to the pale olive of her cheek; and her eyes, large, and dark, and lustrous, were laughing as well as her laughing lips.

“Bless me,” said Aunt Jean to herself, “there’s no man alive could withstand the witchery of that creature!”

But when Briseis chanced to notice the newcomer, her expression instantly changed—not to fear, but to simple amazement. She advanced quickly to meet her.

“Miss Gordon—in Athens—and all alone!” she exclaimed. And then her heart seemed to sink within her. “You—you do not bring ill news?”

“Not at all—not at all!” said Miss Jean, as she took the girl in her arms and kissed her affectionately on both cheeks. “And I’m not alone: Frank is with me——”

Inadvertently and almost imperceptibly Briseis appeared to draw back a little bit.

“And—and who else?” she asked.

“Why, no one! We are just by our two selves. And of course we don’t know a soul in the place; and

we thought it would be awfully kind of you if you would come and spend the evening with us, at the hotel—the Hotel of the Tower of the Winds——”

“All by yourselves!” the girl repeated, in great surprise, and yet apparently well pleased. “But come in—come in—you must let me introduce you to my good friend the Patronne, and she will let me off for the rest of the day; and I will be your cicerone. I must show you the Stadion—that will interest you, you know, because of the revival of the Olympic Games——” And therewith she called aloud a few words, in a tongue that Miss Jean could make nothing of, and straightway the small Greek maidens began to troop into the house, but not before Aunt Jean had assured herself that what she had heard of the exceeding comeliness of many of these youthful daughters of Attica had in no wise been exaggerated.

When they went into the apothēkē they found that the Patronne was engaged with two Italian ladies who were examining the sewn-work and embroideries wrought by the elder girls in the institution; accordingly they had to wait; but when all the purchases had been made, and the visitors had departed, Briseis experienced no difficulty in obtaining her freedom—though with kindly warnings against standing about and getting her feet wet. So that in a brief while she was seated in Aunt Jean’s carriage, and presently

these two were on their way towards the time-worn Stadion.

"Isn't it rather a shame," said Miss Jean, tentatively, "that that poor lad should be left by himself, while I am getting all the benefit of your instruction?"

"We will call for him at the hotel if you wish it," said Briseis, promptly.

"Well, he isn't there, just at present. He said he would wander away up to the Acropolis, to have a look round——"

"The Acropolis? Oh, then, he is brave indeed! For I fear the steps of the Propylaea will be very slippery with the half-melted snow; and on the top there are snow-drifts among the broken pillars—one might meet with an accident——"

"Couldn't we go up and find him there?" suggested Miss Jean, who was not much afraid of any such twopenny-halfpenny snow-drift as the town of Athens was likely to produce. "He would be so glad to see you——"

"Oh, very well, then," said Briseis, good-naturedly, and she addressed a word or two, again in that mysterious tongue, to the driver. "You will have a glimpse of the Stadion in passing, and we will go right on to the Acropolis."

And now it was that Jean Gordon, despite of all

her nerve, knew that her heart was in her mouth; and little heed did she pay to the Stadion, nor yet to the Olympieion, nor to the temple-crowned, snow-powdered heights beyond. Furtively, underneath the rug, her hand stole to the hand of the girl, and held it fast.

"Briseis, my dear child," said she, "I told you I brought no ill-news. And that is true. But I bring news. I don't say that it concerns you—I would not presume to say that. Perhaps it does not—perhaps it does not concern you in the least; and you must not think me impertinent——"

"But what is it, Miss Jean?" said Briseis, wondering.

"Well," said Annt Jean, after a moment's desperate hesitation, "when you were in London, my nephew Frank was engaged to be married. You knew that, of course. But the engagement is all broken off now: he is a free man; and—and he thought you would rather hear of it, in a roundabout way, from me——"

For a second the girl did not seem to realise all that this implied, though at the mere first mention of the news she had grown deadly pale; then suddenly she said, in a sort of breathless fashion—

"Miss Jean, Miss Jean, I would rather go back! You won't mind, will you—some other time I will go to the Acropolis with you—some other time—the chil-

dren—the Patronne—will be expecting me——” And then she herself appeared to see that this was some kind of admission; and she made a wild effort to regain her self-control. “Oh, yes, we will go on,” she managed to say. “Why not? The Propylaea steps may be a little difficult; but that’s nothing. They may have cleared a pathway even—anyhow—anyhow—it will be a singular spectacle for you—you must not miss it. And so you tell me Sir Francis is not to be married after all!—well, well——” But with that her heroic effort to appear unconcerned failed her; and except for a mechanical sentence now and again she relapsed into a silence that Jean Gordon was too considerate to attempt to break. The girl seemed afraid.

And meanwhile Frank Gordon was away up on the summit of the solitary hill, stumbling about among the broken pillars, or surveying the wide prospect around him, from the white-clad range of Parnes to the blue waters of the Gulf of Aegina. The luck of this fellow!—to have come to Athens for the first time and found it all a marvel of snow-radiance and azure sea. As for his inspection of the ancient monuments, that was of a quite ignorant and perfunctory character; perhaps his imagination was busy elsewhere; and unmistakably he had to attend a good deal to his footing—for the wind-driven snow had covered over not only the deep seams

and fissures in the rock itself but also the spaces between the tumbled and shattered columns, so that everywhere were treacherous holes. But in the roofed-over portion of the Erectheum there was less of drift; and here the beautiful scroll-work of the cornices was clearly exposed to view; so that he lingered in these precincts for a long time—thinking and thinking—perchance of egg-and-dart, and key, and honeysuckle: perchance not.

Voices broke in upon his reverie—a strange sound on this lonely and snow-hushed height. They drew nearer; and not wishing to be caught in a corner, as it were, by strangers, he withdrew from this sheltered spot, and passed out by the tall Ionic pillars. When he got into the open, Briseis was standing there. She was standing there, waiting. There was no pretence in her eyes now, as she regarded him. For the moment her attitude was not unlike that of the restored Caryatid in the portico hard by—just as noble, and simple, and gracious; but this living and breathing figure was of flesh and blood, as was evident enough in the colour of her face and in the shrinking and maiden wistfulness of her look. To him it was all a vision—a flash: the next instant his outstretched hands had seized hers, and drawn her to him.

“My own!” he said—and she had no word in reply.

By this time Jean Gordon had gone away. The fact is as the gardeners at Grantly Castle knew to their sorrow, she had a trick, no matter in what outlandish part she might be—or the more outlandish the better—of collecting roots, slips, cuttings, and the like, to try if these could be got to grow in Aberdeenshire: and now, close by the Temple of the Six Virgins, she was industriously engaged in brushing away the snow from certain clumps of withered weeds and thistles, seeking for some prickly bulb or seed that she might carry off. Also she was much interested in the figure of the replaced Caryatid, for the mutilated original is in the British Museum; and she was saying to it: “Yes, you are indeed very beautiful, and serene, and sweet, but you have not the magnetism and the witchery of the laughing girl I saw half an hour ago throwing snowballs in the orchard.” She left the lovers to themselves.

And thus it was that on this spacious plateau, which through so many centuries has been the cynosure of all the civilised world—on this lofty plateau that looks abroad on surroundings sufficiently august—Pentelicus, Hymettus, Aegaleos, and the shining blue of the Bay of Salamis—here it was that a betrothal took place, of two souls that had thought themselves sundered for ever, but had come together at last. And truly it

was a fitting day for such a betrothal, a day altogether auspicious; for it is not every morning that the City of the Violet Crown arrays herself in her bridal robes of silver and white.

THE END.

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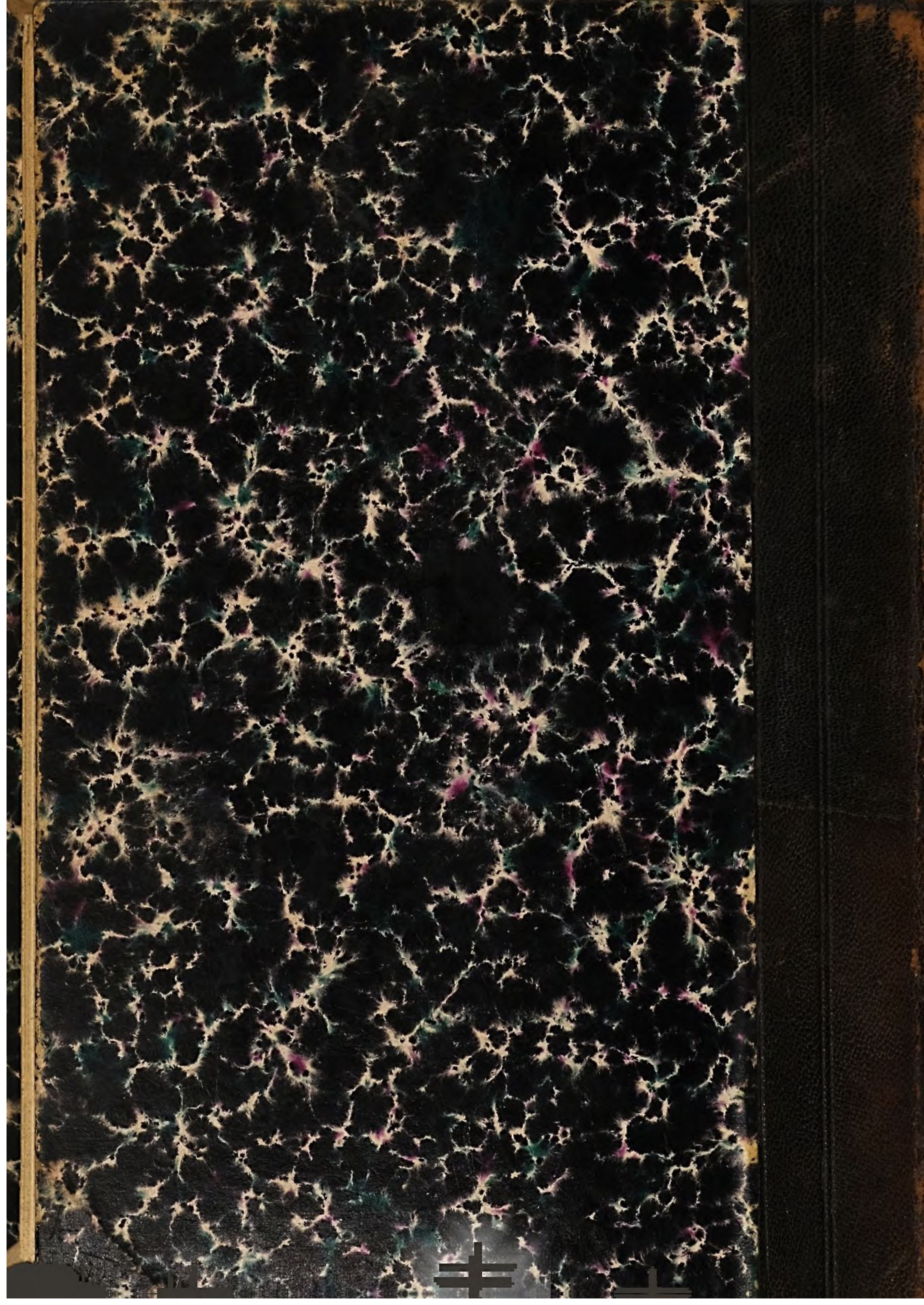
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